
Uncovering the Major Drivers Behind Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation in Northwestern Nigeria

Mubarak Sulaiman JAMIU*

*Department of Politics and Governance, Faculty of Management and Social Sciences,
Kwara State University
e-mail: mubarak.jamiu@kwasu.edu.ng

Abstract

The spread of SALW in Northwestern Nigeria has intensified banditry, communal attacks, kidnapping, and insecurity. Guided by the Jurgen and Muggah theory, this study examines why weapons are acquired and how they circulate across the region. The analysis draws on Key Informant Interviews conducted with 25 respondents across five Northwestern states, supported by secondary sources. Findings show illiteracy, perceived injustice, economic marginalization, illegal mining, community self-defense, weak governance, and poor judicial enforcement drive demand for ammunition. These motivations are sustained by porous borders, instability in the Sahel, smuggling networks, limited security capacity, and evolving trafficking routes. Together, these factors reinforce a cycle of violence among bandits, militias, criminal groups, and affected communities. The study concludes that proliferation reflects governance and socio-economic failures rather than a stand-alone security issue and calls for a multidimensional response that strengthens border control, improves security capacity, and supports regional cooperation, justice reform, and community-based disarmament.

Keywords:

Northwestern Nigeria; Human Security; Arms Proliferation; Small Arms and Light Weapons.

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Introduction

Small arms and light weapons (SALW) have become characteristic of the security crisis in Nigeria, with a detrimental effect on human security as well as an aggravation of violence in diverse regions. These illegal weapons arm common non-state armed groups, insurgents, and networks of crime, leading to unending insecurity, displacement, and a halt in economic flows. The insurgents like Boko Haram have been able to perpetuate their extremist violence in the Northeast by stealing military guns from the stockpiles and have suffered indiscriminate violence against life, livelihood, and dignity (Iroegbu 2022). In a related manner, armed groups in the Niger Delta have used SALW to raid oil installations, abduct civilians, and compromise governance and development (Akinola 2011). These weapons are also experienced in the Middle Belt, where farmer-herder conflicts are turning into the deadly type of retaliatory violence with both parties equipping themselves (International Crisis Group 2021).

These impacts of the proliferation of SALW transcend several security dimensions, such as economic, food, health, personal, community, and political. It interferes with farming, hinders the delivery of medical services, displaces whole groups of people, and undermines governmental power (Iroegbu 2022). A number of drivers support this crisis, including diversion of legally shared weaponry, transnational criminal organisations, legacies of previous conflicts, soft borders, weak controls on weapons, and national corruption (United Nations Press Release 2021). The dynamics lead to the eruption of fertile grounds to armed structures, criminal activities, and intercommunal violence as well, which enhance the insecurity levels in Nigeria (Bashir 2014).

The challenge is national, but Northwest has become a significant infectious hot spot over the past several years. According to Muoemenam and Okafor (2022), the region is among the worst regions gripped by SALW-related crimes, and this is coupled with the Northeast and Southeast. Fulani militias and armed bandit bands have been rampaging the Northwest, killing, kidnapping and masse and mass displacing citizens. Self-help has become the only option that most citizens can find because the ability of the state to grant protection has been further and further diminished. The increased role of non-state actors within the region may be strongly associated with the historical grievances, such as perceived marginalization, the lack of good governance, and systematic neglect.

The Nigerian government's inability to provide security and execute efficient arms control has led to a failure of people's trust. The populace has to endure poverty, hunger, and unemployment; the inability of the state to fulfil its duties has forced a large number of people to buy guns (Adeyemi 2021). The deficits in governance, characterized by unresponsiveness, corruption, and an ineffective justice system, have allowed the proliferation of weapons and emboldened the people, who disrupt the control of the states. According to Mustapha (2013) and Christian (2020), the

maintenance of pre-independence control systems like the security institutions of colonialists still affects the structures of the post-independence government. Unless there is active reform and inclusive government, all the primary causes of insecurity, such as the lack of control on the flow of arms, are bound to continue ([Amujiri and Agu 2012](#)).

Thus, the following paper is aimed at discussing the key contributors to the spread of small armaments and light weapons in Northwestern Nigeria. It investigates the interaction between regional crises, institutional fragilities, and the socio-political forces to find out how the region has become an environment that perpetuates the trade in arms and the worsening of security.

Objectives

To ascertain the major factors aiding the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Northwestern Nigeria.

Literature Review

The international proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) has posed a serious security challenge to policymakers and security analysts. According to Tsaku (2021), the circulation of 640 million weapons in the whole world includes about 100 million in Africa, including 30 million and 8 million in sub-Saharan and West Africa, respectively. A majority of weapon possessions are by civilians at about 59 percent, government armed forces 38 percent, police 2.8 percent, and armed groups 0.2 percent of the total 100 percent, which depicts high access by civilians that contributes to insecurity.

Some researchers have also discussed the conditions that continue the proliferation of SALW. According to Klimkowski (2021), this can be explained by the presence of both political instability and corruption, as well as corruption, and strategic geography. The author says that national and international concerted efforts should lead to meaningful solutions. According to Oluwarotimi (as cited in [Christian 2020](#)), good governance is needed to address insecurity. According to her, one of the effective ways of weakening the drivers of armed violence is to improve the standards of governance, particularly accountability and transparency. Adeyemi (2021) continues to argue this case, detailing that in order to have a significant impact, good governance has to be participatory, consensus-based, and must enforce the rule of law.

Within Northwestern Nigeria, the widespread SALW has increased the phenomenon of armed banditry and kidnapping. Availability of SALW to organized criminal gangs has enabled them to raid communities with violence, loot, and kidnap civilians to get a ransom ([Idris 2021](#)). These attacks have caused widespread displacement, destruction of livelihoods, and a rising fear that affects social and economic life. This

has been fueled by the illicit arms that have made these groups feel more confident in overwhelming the local security services, enhancing their arrogance and the feeling of lawlessness.

The human security consequences are serious. Odia (2023) observes that banditry not only brings economic distress due to murders and kidnappings but also educational decline and lack of access to medical services as well. In most situations, children have lost the right to education because of school closures when faced with security threats. Such knock-on effects are a source of inter-generational poverty and worsen regional inequality.

Idris (2021) and Iroegbu (2022) also contain empirical evidence that the availability of SALWs allows non-state armed groups, such as Boko Haram, militants, and bandits, to conduct a prolonged violence campaign against the civilian population. The effect is displacement, law and order failure, and the disruption of important services. Ibrahim and Bala (2018) and Phillip (2018) further contribute that the spread of these weapons undermines the rule of law since, through them, gender-based violence, extrajudicial killings, and arbitrary arrests become possible.

Besides, local populations have had their economic welfare threatened. Proliferation of SALW has destabilized food security and economic development because the agricultural and commercial activities, among other means of livelihood, have been destabilized. As it has been clarified in the research of the International Crisis Group (2021), the flare-up of communal conflicts over land and water availability has also been caused by the easy admission of these weapons, strengthening the spiral of revenge violence and undermining dispute resolution mechanisms.

Simone Wisotzki (2021) discusses the attempts of the world community to curb the proliferation of small arms and light weapons and states that in the majority of cases, these attempts have not given the desired outcome. Her discussion reveals that the UN Programme of Action is failing as states are in conflict over sensitive areas like civilian ownership and transfers to non-state actors. These differences left critical gaps in the framework, particularly in such areas as ammunition control. The system depends largely on self-reporting, which makes numerous states escape total compliance. This has caused uneven implementation across the nations and undermined the fundamental goals of the UNPoA.

Another aspect which Wisotzki pays attention to is the mixed origins of the crisis. Outside influences are those involving trafficking across porous boundaries, corruption, and poor tracking of the cross-border transfer. The internal pressures are poor governance, poor management of the stockpile, and less accountability among the security institutions. There is also the availability of new technologies, such as modular weapons and 3D printing, which complicate regulation. In the case of Wisotzki, technical failures are not the only way out of the problem. What

is more troublesome is a lapse of political will, as the effective control should be associated with the more extensive reforms in the security institutions, development planning, and post-conflict reconstruction. Devoid of this broader commitment, she asserts that the international standards of SALW control will still experience severe challenges.

Amali and Buthelezi (2025) further discuss the issue of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons and the ways they jeopardize the national security of Nigeria. They note that the common concern with porous borders is not the sole reason why the problem is so. Their output demonstrates that the demand for weapons increases in the environment, characterized by poverty, inequality, and political exclusion, whereas poor border control only allows smugglers to transfer the weapons to the country more easily. Their analysis is based on the information presented in the National Security Strategy of Nigeria, the National Commission on SALWs, UNODC, the Small Arms Survey, and reports of prominent media and human rights organizations. Combined, these sources enable them to have a clear image of the ways structural issues on the home side and lack of control at entry points are interconnected.

They discover that the increasing level of insecurity and bad economic states have promoted the development of criminal gangs and other militant groups who depend on such weapons. This encompasses organizations in banditry and insurgency. Meanwhile, poorly controlled borders contribute to the perpetuation of the illicit supply of arms. It is on these findings that the authors believe the government should act on two fronts. One of them is to decrease the need for weapons through the solution of inequality and political marginalization. The other one is to intensify the supply-side controls by enhancing the control of the borders, investing in surveillance technology, and implementing more effective control measures. They arrive at a conclusion that the two fronts should be dealt with simultaneously in case Nigeria wishes to curb the proliferation of these weapons and enhance national security.

Machakanja and Manuel (2021) equally address the role of regional politics in Southern Africa that influence the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. They indicate in their chapter that the borders are weak, the historical grievances are not resolved, and the unequal state capacity has been used to leave a large gap of illicit arms markets. They indicate that the post-conflict countries usually experience high volumes of stockpiles that are not well-maintained. These arms find their way into the neighboring states with the weak governance or the armed groups in the remote states. Another observation made by the authors is that, due to the protracted existence of smuggling networks coupled with the limited collaboration of the security agencies, governments find it hard to prevent the flow of illegal weapons across borders.

They also suggest that economic poverty, political instability, and lack of confidence in the state institutions among people make the need to possess weapons among civilians and armed groups greater. Within such a setting, the initiative of regional organizations like SADC has been marked by both successes and failures since the implementation depends on the national governments with highly varied capacities and political priorities. The authors state that technical controls will not fix the issue. Instead, it is essential to have effective regional cooperation reinforced by more powerful national institutions, improved management of stockpiles, and the commitment of the member states in reality. Their comparison is useful in explaining why Southern Africa still faces the challenge of SALW proliferation, even though several regional agreements are in place.

Tar and Onwurah (2021) present an extensive source of literature that discusses the causes and effects of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Africa. The handbook demonstrates the influence of weak institutions, unresolved conflicts, porous boundaries, and political competition, which have made the illicit flow of weapons very easy in the environment. The editors draw attention to the connections among SALW flows and issues on a larger scale, including state frailty, criminal groups, and insecurity at a community level. As demonstrated by their contributors, these weapons are not only the consequences of conflict but also their fuel and the reason why the violence continues, making it hard to fix and overwhelming the state's capacity.

The volume also emphasizes the fact that the reaction to the SALW issue is still imbalanced. Although most African states have signed international and regional treaties, these are usually slow or uneven in implementation due to the lack of resources, political goodwill, or lack of effective supervision by governments. Tar and Onwurah believe that effective progress would demand stronger national institutions, an effective accountability system, and more systematic regional collaboration. They also observe that community involvement, better border control, and clear stockpile control are necessary in case states wish to minimize the supply of illegal weapons. The handbook lays a general ground for realizing the impact of SALW proliferation on insecurity on the continent and why the control policies are yet to be effective.

This literature body points out that the growth of SALW in Nigeria is not only a security ordeal but an inter-dimensional challenge to the national progress. A comprehensive solution, which has to act on governance change, regional collaboration, institutional enhancement, and community robustness, is necessary to handle it.

Methodology

The manuscript research uses a qualitative approach of research purposely because it allows free expression, elimination of preconceived notions, an expansive tour of the

sphere of research undertaken, and arousal of interests or excitation in the minds of individuals on their own particular opinions. In this study, the purposive sampling technique as a method of recruiting subjects is thus employed to conduct viable research and a valid data collection. The number of respondents employed for this research is in line with the argument of Glaser and Strauss (1967), which argues that the number of individuals recruited would depend on the point at which saturation is attained. The distribution of the respondents that will be picked to be interviewed through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) is in five states in Northwestern Nigeria. The states that were covered comprised Kebbi, Sokoto, Zamfara, Katsina, and Jigawa, and each state included one local government area and one village or town sampled. The 5 key informants from each of the locations selected were interviewed, giving a total of 25 key informants. It is also an intentional engagement in trying out a balanced representation in the key conflict areas of the region in question. Dandi, Sabon Birni, Zurmi, Jibya, and Maigatari are the local governments selected in the KII because they are located in peripherally based or borderland areas, and these areas are usually typified by permeable borders as well as state absence. These regions have always been reported and addressed in literatures as potential hotspots in the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), due to their proximity to the border, their transnational smuggling syndicates, and lack of law enforcement penetration. Moreover, the choice of a single site per state represents a methodological complication to assure geographic dispensing, but maintain the sample and thus be qualitatively similar to the area units. The consistency in the number of interviews that is set at five at each of the sites strengthens the cross-site comparisons and makes it easier to identify trends within the region on the process of arms proliferation and insecurity.

The criteria used to select respondents for the purpose of this study are based on their relevance to the study, their ability to provide unbiased information for the study, and to also fit to give accurate information to the study. Below is a table showing the category of respondents interviewed.

TABLE no. 1. Table Showing Respondents Category

S/N	Target Population
1	Traditional/Community Leaders
2	Repentant Bandits
3	Community Security Agents (Members of Vigilante Groups)
4	Nigerian Customs Officers
5	Nigerian Immigration Officers & Nigerian Army
6	Nigerian Police Officers & Civil Defence Officers

Source: Author's Compilation, 2025

This research collected its data through Field observation, Key Informant Interviews, alongside government reports and documentation. Other secondary data used were extracted from journals, textbooks, newspapers, and the work of other scholars in the area under study.

The research included a thematic analysis of the collected data using NVivo 15. The programme was utilized to perform data coding and pattern building based on in-depth interviews. The process of transcription and coding was based on the recorded interviews. The interviews with participants were conducted in English and Hausa. Transcribing audio from an audio recording, like an interview, into text is known as transcribing, as transcriptions were equally performed before the final step of analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Jürgen and Muggah's Theory of Small Arms Demand

That is why it is necessary to elaborate on the arguments of the proposed theory, stating the locations and the reasons of obtaining small arms and light weapons (SALW), in other words, their demand (Jurgen and Muggah 2006). This theory does not focus on misuse or abuse, but it mainly looks at the structural conditions that guide procurement with emphasis on the effects of demographic, social, political, and economic factors in the small arms acquisition. The model described by Jurgen and Muggah offers the demand as a consequence of two factors: incentives (why persons or groups want to get weapons) and means (the access to those weapons), which combine the result of two lenses to study small arms markets.

Findings of the case studies on various conflict-prone and high-crime settings such as Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, South Africa, and Brazil support the theory in question. These contexts were taken to shed light on the role of ideas of insecurity, weak governance, poverty, and social marginalization that lead to civilian demand for SALW. In this way, Jurgen and Muggah (2006) provide a basis for forming evidence-based strategies that would reduce the demand for arms using local, having in mind context-sensitive interventions primarily based on field data.

Applying the theory to the situation in Nigeria, we obtain a good framework with the help of which it is possible to analyse the escalation of armed violence in the region of Nigeria and the Northwest. Indeed, the theory provides an overarching conceptual framework of the assessment of the underlying origins of SALW acquisition, which is primarily rooted in possession or misuse of the SALW, but deeper and broader, in structural and systemic facilitation (Roosevelt and Subair 2021). They affirm that the theory emphasises the motivations of arms acquisition by different social and political forces such as marginalisation, lack of trust in state institutions, and perceived or actual threats.

In a micro-level analysis of civilian insecurity in Delhi, Sonal Marwah (2010) further proves the usefulness of the theory in the local level context. Calling on the principle of disaggregation of demand, Marwah explains why the personal experience of insecurity of human beings, when joined with available means, results in weapons purchase. This area-based intervention stands in close relation to local dynamics in Northwestern Nigeria, where local populations are commonly equipped with arms as institutions have limited capabilities to protect them, and both bandit and other gunmen activities are increasing.

This framework by Jurgen and Muggah is also used in the research work of Agu Agidi and Ugada M. (2024) conducted on the application of SALW in the general elections of 2019 conducted in Benue State, Nigeria. They point out that the theory emphasizes the interaction between insecurity and arms demand in politically sensitive times. To some extent, elections are potential conflict zones in conflict regions, like the Northwest, where insecurity and political competition may exponentially increase the SALW demands in youth militia groups and socially sponsored groups.

Keith Krause (2007) confirms that the other research by Muggah draws on the demand of SALW to be associated with poverty and inequality. These are socio-economic situations, which make small arms be viewed as weapons of self-defense, livelihood security, or even weapons of power. It can be observed in Northwestern Nigeria, where poverty and inequality are combined with historical grievances and ethnic tensions, and therefore promote the spread of SALW.

Sasha Jespersen (2016) continues this argument to the question of governance and its ability to regulate markets in arms. Summoning his theoretical perspective by Jurgen and Muggah, Jespersen refers to the significance of the institutional trust and state capacity in damping down the arms demands. Post-conflict situations or weak states, like in the Northwest of Nigeria, where the security agencies are largely untrusted, historical conflicts are still outstanding, and violence is tolerated, create a further drive in the use of SALW to protect and to execute acts of retaliation.

In combination, these academic uses of the theory stress how the theory is applied with regard to the complex and multifaceted nature of SALW proliferation. The Theory of Small Arms Demand, which is excellently developed by Jurgen and Muggah in Northwestern Nigeria, where violence is perpetuated by complex social, economic, and political realities, has a solid background to question the motivation and the mechanism of the armed violence. It stresses that in the absence of the reduction of such drivers as poverty, political marginalization, and the lack of state presence, attempts to decrease the traffic of arms can be futile.

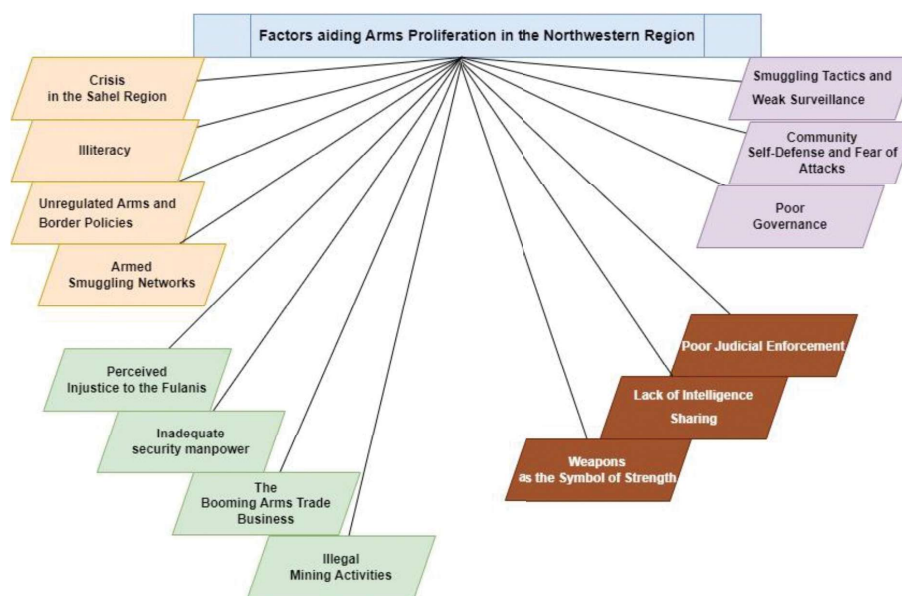


Figure 1 Factors Aiding Arms Proliferation in the Northwestern Region

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork; Draw.io. 2025

The figure above displays the pictorial view containing the Reasons for the proliferation of small and light weapons in Northwest Nigeria, which is the main objective.

Data Analysis

This section contains the analysis of data gotten from the field using the NVivo 15 software. The analysis dwells on the manuscript's main objective, which is to ascertain the main factors that aid arms proliferation in the northwestern region.

1. Crisis in the Sahel Region

The crisis in the region is a contributing problem leading to the spread of ammunition in the region. The interview revealed that there is a crisis in the Sahel region of Africa caused by the fallout of unrest in the Sahel region, such as Libya, Chad, and Niger (Inf25 & Inf4). Another informant added that weapons from the past crises resurface in society. Availability of arms increases communal clashes (Inf4).

2. Illiteracy

The number of uneducated youths in the region is growing day by day, as the informant interview revealed that there are several reasons behind the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in north-western Nigeria. Part of it is illiteracy, poverty, and unemployment of the youth (Inf22). Another informant added that the reason why there is arms proliferation is illiteracy and insecurity itself, after illiteracy, unemployment, and insecurity itself (Inf22& Inf25). In another development, an informant put it that the core reasons behind the increasing level of the spread of small arms and light weapons in this part of the northern side of Nigeria can be traced to low levels of education and

poverty (Inf25 & Inf22). Similarly, an informant put it that:

It's hard to encounter educated people engaging in arms deals or illegal arms possession, and on the other hand, it's also hard to encounter people with jobs or who are gainfully employed to have arms and ammunition (Inf26).

3. Unregulated Arms

Another sub-theme developed is unregulated arms control, the interview conducted suggesting that Arms regulation is weak and access to ammunition gives room for bargaining (Inf20). Another informant put it that "Lack of effective control measures and enforcement mechanisms has contributed to widespread availability of small arms and light weapons in the region" (Inf10& Inf11). Also, the interview added that:

The Nigerian government's efforts have had limited success, with ongoing challenges like corruption, weak enforcement, and porous borders hindering effective control and security. Government regulatory loopholes come from a lack of policy implementation. Unregistered arms dealers operate due to weak economic regulations (Inf11)

Another informant added that Arm monitoring agencies are underfunded (Inf46). In another development, another informant stated that there is a network of unregulated arms transactions (Inf13 & Inf21), and there are a lot of unregulated transactions due to informal markets (Inf20).

4. Armed Network

There is arm network going on in the Sahel region due to the collapse of Libya; many armories were opened, and weapons got to the criminal gangs. The interviews further show that international arms movement has been coordinated by a criminal network, and local armament has been increased by external armed groups (Inf20). Also, sophisticated weapons are more in circulation due to a stronger external supply network (Inf12).

5. Injustice matted to the Fulanis

Part of the reasons for the proliferation of arms in the region is because injustice is a reason for the increase, especially related to the Fulanis (Inf18)

6. Inadequate Manpower

There is inadequate manpower that the security agencies are facing, as the interviews revealed inadequate and insufficient manpower (Inf14). Another informant added the lack of sufficient equipment to security agencies and the lack of personnel (Inf20).

The negligence on the part of security personnel is causing a whole lot of havoc in the northwestern region. Some of

the smugglers can carry in small arms and light weapons by virtue of the fact that they are able to bribe their way in through the corrupt security personnel and or lazy officers who are unable to do their search diligently (Inf21).

Another informant observed that there are limited numbers of security personnel (Inf15). Finally, an informant put it that they do not have enough manpower and the level of corruption is high (Inf 17& Inf25).

7. Booming Business

The actors involved are getting a lot of money, as the interview shows the profit in arms trade is keeping the business to thrive (Inf2), also another informant added that the economic benefit gotten from banditry encourages this (Inf47). In addition, black-market transaction is on the increase in the general market (Inf 3). Similarly, an informant said that

The extravagant lifestyle and huge amounts of money being made from arms smuggle is another major factor that is contributing significantly to the menace of small arms and light weapons proliferation (Inf6 & Inf7).

Another informant put it that:

Trading in this part of the region contributes significantly to the spread of arms and equally to the high level of immorality in the society. The “Illicit arms production brings financial benefit. There is complicity in the arms trade (Inf7).

The issue of arms trading is also a factor that has brought about arms proliferation. The interview further revealed that:

Small arms and light weapons are also aided by trading activities where a trader wants to cross or encroach into other nations’ borders at all costs to trade their commodities (Inf24).

8. Illegal Mining

The activities of miners also create problems, as the evidence from the interviews shows:

Illegal mining activities necessitate the acquisition of arms (Inf19, Inf22, Inf25). Illegal mining activities impact the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. The presence of mineral resources like gold has resulted in illegal mining (Inf15). Also, there is the reliance of armed escorts on illegal mining sites (Inf16)

9. Tricks Used in Arms Smuggling

There are many tricks used in smuggling arms and ammunition, like donkeys, camels, etc. The interviews conducted show that:

Part of the tricks used by smugglers to bring in illicit arms

and ammunition is by hiding those arms in grains to escape being caught at the border, which, of course, brings about more arms in circulation (Inf 1).

Another informant stated that nomadic farmers and traders' aid arms trade (Inf15). Similarly, foreign used arms are being smuggled into the country (Inf13). Therefore, drone-assisted smuggling is on the rise, armed traffickers use the lapses in the law, which led to piracy and sea robbery, cattle rustling, etc.

10. Fear of Attack

Fear of attack contributed to the rising cases of proliferation of ammunition in North-west, as an informant said:

The fear of being attacked by bandits has brought about the acquisition of small arms and light weapons in the region. There is also the issue of modernization, where our youths want to copy the Western world (Inf18& Inf19).

Another interviewee put it that some people in the North-western region see arm-acquisition as a way to protect themselves and families from every form of attack, either from within or outside (Inf4).

11. Poor Governance

Poor governance has also contributed to rising insecurity in North-west Nigeria, as the interviews show:

Loss of confidence in the government to protect its citizens amidst the emergence of security challenges in the region. The nature of Nigerian politics makes it such that those in the most remote regions hardly feel the impact of government, except, of course, during elections (Inf7)

This has created a lucrative market for illicit arms dealers. Similarly, an informant said that another significant factor is poor governance and neglect by the government, which has led to the proliferation of militias and armed groups in the region (Inf6). In addition, there is a lack of transparency in policy implementation (Inf17 & Inf2). In addition, corrupt customs officers accept bribes and allow illicit goods through the borders (Inf46 & Inf20). The hypocrisy of the government security personnel.

There is absolutely no way the presence of fortified state-backed military and paramilitary outfits in these communities would not scare away the non-state intruders. A state-backed military is equipped with better military hardware to defeat the opponent (Inf25 & Inf 20)

In another development, an informant put it that, in his own opinion, if bribery and corruption are being tackled among security operatives, there will be less proliferation of small arms and light weapons in use (Inf1 & Inf2). Some top

government officials are benefiting from the crime/crisis. However, an informant further put it that:

Corrupt officers who are in charge of safeguarding the border have made it almost impossible for proliferation to stop and are increasingly aiding the smuggling of small arms and light weapons in the region (Inf4 & Inf10).

Therefore, the communities that perceive government neglect seek self-protection using small arms and light weapons. Poor governance makes the proliferation of small arms easier due to ineffective policies. The “factors like greediness and corruption are the cause” (Inf 11).

Government neglect is a cause of self-reliance; there are some so-called government officials who sometimes benefit from arms deals (Inf12). In another development in Katsina, weak government presence has led to escalating farmer-herder clashes, with communities resorting to self-defence militias (Inf19). There has been a strategy of strategizing security patterns and the introduction of different policies, as another informant put it, when corruption is the order of the day, money meant for acquiring weapons would be embezzled (Inf24). Poor governance gives room for lapses in the security architecture. Poor governance contributes significantly to issues surrounding border porosity, which brings about arms smuggling and arms trade in the North-western region. Poor governance is synonymous with poor administration of policies (Inf25 & Inf1). There is a poor policies. Arms proliferation is always prosperous due to poor governance (Inf12 & Inf15). Similarly, due to low wages, security personnel accept bribes as well as diversion of security funds for other personal purposes (Inf19). Another informant said that:

Reasons that can be attributed to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons are the ill collaboration between the corrupt security personnel and the arms smugglers at the borders (Inf 23).

12. Lack of judicial penalties

The informant further revealed that the slow and weak legal consequences encourage the illicit arms trade (Inf13). In another development, an informant said judicial leniency discourages security forces (Inf15). Another informant said the nature of weak judicial consequences leads to continuous activities of political thuggery and limited enforcement of arms control policies (Inf12). Also, there is a lack of judicial penalties for erring armed smugglers (Inf1). There is a lack of strict punishment for offenders and a weak judicial system (Inf17). In addition, there is the idea of jungle justice because of a failed judicial system (Inf20). Finally, there is weak enforcement of law by government officials” (Inf 15).

13. Weak government commitments

There is also weak support from the government, as the interviews revealed corruption, lack of political will, politicization of the process, etc. (Inf18& Inf11).

On the contrary, another informant put it that:

The government is doing its best in the eradication of small and light weapons. That's why we have a center that records all the recovered arms in circulation. It has degraded the overall security situation. Trading of ordinary AK-47 for foodstuffs happens at intervals (Inf14)

Economic interests, lack of political will, security concerns, and institutional challenges. The analysis also shows that the Nigerian government is not doing enough as a system to curb the issue of small arms and light weapons proliferation in the northwestern Nigeria” (Inf22). Also, the lack of commitment on the part of the government is a big obstacle that serves as a barrier for development and also aids the proliferation of SAWL (Inf24). In addition, an informant said that addressing the proliferation of small arms requires a multi-pronged approach, which the government has failed to prioritize due to competing national interests” (Inf17). The government shows no sincerity of purpose (Inf12). There is a delay in action taking” (Inf13). Also, there is a lack of sincerity (Inf15). Also, that will be an unfair assessment, but their efforts are not yielding results” (Inf1). An informant also reported that it was weak and required more action and sustainable policies” (Inf2). In addition, it has acquired a political economy dimension with strong vested interest in the government circle (Inf3). Another informant said governments may not prioritize the eradication of small arms and light weapons due to competing interests, lack of resources, or limited political will (Inf7). The intervention to curb the menace is, on average, but lacks consistency and consolidation. The government should do more (Inf11). In another development, an informant said that he perceived a lack of appropriate attitudes of our government towards security issues (Inf12). Another informant said that:

The use of arms by local security forces, especially when there is little or no state support, also leads to an increased demand for weapons. Poor monitoring of borders also encourages cross-border smuggling. Also, some politicians arm militias, which leads to long-term circulation of weapons, due to corruption within government officials and enforcement agencies, stolen or seized (Inf8).

14. Inadequate intelligence sharing

The interviews further revealed that intelligence sharing among security agencies is weak, leading to armed proliferation, the act of poor intelligence by security operatives (Inf10); another informant added that “Intelligence gathering is inadequate (Inf17, Inf7), also “Poor intelligence gathering promotes small arms proliferation (Inf12). Another informant put it that there is an obstruction of intelligence sharing between rival agencies (Inf10). Finally, there is weak intelligence sharing among security personnel (Inf14). Another informant added that communities establish informal communication networks to share intelligence on potential attacks, allowing for rapid response or evacuation (Inf22).

15. Acquisition of arms as a symbol of power

People glorified violence in the region to the extent that acquisition of arms as a symbol of power, as another informant put it, is seen to be a symbol of masculinity; they acquire those guns for personal reasons (Inf18). Another informant added that militarization of local policing fuels rearmament (Inf19). Also, an informant said that some individuals hide under the pretense of defending themselves during an inter-communal crisis to acquire small arms and light weapons (Inf20).

Discussion of Findings

This section is thematized into two parts, which is in line with the theoretical assumptions of Jurgen and Morgan. This division into motivation/incentives and means/capabilities is also given due to the fact that it clearly separates the factors that drive individuals and groups to desire weapons and structures or opportunities to get and distribute said weapons. Incentives indicate the social, political, and economic pressures that groups have undergone and which require them to demand arms, which include grievance, insecurity, poverty, and profit. Means are the pragmatic avenues through which the movement and availability of weaponry become feasible; some of them consist of porous borders, trafficking networks, poor presence of security, and regional instability. It is possible to better see how the motivations and enabling conditions interact to maintain the presence of small arms and light weapons in North-western Nigeria, which is fundamental to formulating the targeted policy response that responds to the causes and the enablers of the crisis.

Motivations/Incentives

1. Illiteracy

The prevalence of illiteracy in the North-western region has complicated the situation of security since it has generated a group of youth that is susceptible and can easily be fooled. Rufa'i (2023) suggests that the absence of proper educational opportunities has created a situation in which the youth can become recruits of arms dealing, violent gangs, and brutal groups. The problem with illiteracy is a lack of knowledge of legal behavior and citizenship, and thus, recruiting young people is far simpler for armed groups into criminal groups. In addition, the educational situation in most rural communities is a cause of this predicament due to the absence of actual schools, teachers, and learning materials. The lack of educational facilities and livelihood stigmatizes what goes in as a loop of violence, where guns are not only viewed as survival instruments, but also as sources of influence and power.

2. Perceived Injustice to the Fulanis

This perceived injustice, especially among Fulani communities, has led some of them to pick up arms to defend themselves and also fight back. According to Rosenje (2020), the resentment that has made violent outlets of grievance towards the system in question has grown in the context of systemic marginalization and political

exclusion. A lot of Fulani herders perceive the government policies and community enmity to be targeted, and this adds to the motivation that drives them to be well armed. Not only has it been a cause of these tensions, but the spread of weapons has been both a cause and result of allowing violent reprisals and communal conflicts. This situation makes peace building difficult and intensifies distrust between ethnic groups and the nation, and leaves the whole place in a fragile state full of unending experienced violence.

3. The Booming Arms Trade Business

The trade in weapons has turned out to be a lucrative business backed by the requests of the bandit gangs and rebels. According to Rufa'i (2023), the number of weapons held by groups in Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna is estimated at 30,000, whereas a lot of them are employed in mass kidnappings and extortion. There is a high economic incentive to get involved in the trafficking of arms, as an AK-47 gun is reportedly being sold as high as 1,000,000 Naira. OCHA (2023) outlines the changes the problem of banditry in the region has reached since it has become a quasi-formalized insurgency, which is being maintained through the availability of mechanisms of firearms. This trade is becoming all the more appealing to criminal entrepreneurs due to its high level of returns on investment and laxity in the arms control legislation.

4. Illegal Mining Activities

In Zamfara, Katsina, and Kebbi, illegal mineral (mainly gold) mining has given rise to an alternative economy that facilitates the financing of armed groups. Rufa'i (2023) notes that the income generated by illegal mines is commonly used to acquire weapons, and mining fields turn out to be the targets of intense violence. Such mining processes are very unregulated and are a source of income and a rallying point for the criminal syndicates. According to Akinyetun (2021), exploitation in the use of natural resources contributes to persistence in violence, where major interventions have to be taken by states to break such economies of violence. The combination of the extraction of resources and arms trade deepens the war economy that is prosperous in the condition of insecurity.

5. Community Self-Defense and Fear of Attacks

In most societies, a lack of security by the state has induced the creation of self-defense groups. Alao (2022) charts the effect of the extensive displacement and threats of bandit attacks, forcing the masses to buy guns to protect themselves. Although these self-defense programs are organized to protect the community, the program, in most cases, matures into militarized community organizations, subscribing to retaliation or other violent encounters. Even with this response being easy to understand, it makes the controlled circulation of arms impossible because this allows simplifying disarmament efforts. It also creates ambiguity between civilians and combatants, which complicates the work of conflict resolution.

6. Poor Governance

The state has become unable to exercise security because of the culture of corruption and weak institutions. Visoka (2022) states that the governance issue in Nigeria covers the inability of the state to provide law enforcement, service provision, and maintain peace due to the government's problems. Embezzlement of the funds to finance the security activities, poor political will, and unaccountability of the funds are some of the factors that lead to the failure of policy implementation. In that sense, weapons turn into the instruments of political dominance, and they are being used to threaten their rivals or interfere with the election processes, deepening instability even further. The lack of good governance allows non-state actors to come in and occupy the vacuum, which is done through violent approaches.

7. Poor Judicial Enforcement

Regulation of the arms is an outdated legal construct, and it is not enforced in a consistent manner. Malami et al. (2018) cite the Firearms Act of 1959 as not adequate in solving the modern-day issues. The researchers point to the absence of a special National Commission on SALW and to the likelihood that court cases on arms trafficking will be dropped or shelved, making a statement of impunity to those wishing to commit a crime. Real impact and stiff punishment are absent in the case of arms dealers and smugglers, and therefore, they go about their business without fear of any punishment, and the victims of arms violence are not able to get their justice.

8. Lack of Intelligence Sharing

There is weak collaboration and intelligence sharing among agencies in security efforts. Through this argument, Agu and Uguda (2024) posit that intelligence delivery networks are fragmented, and competition amongst agencies does not allow a quick reaction to security threats. The inability to create standard communication patterns among the security agencies prevents them from being proactive, and the traffickers of arms get to escape. There is a need to intensify inter-agency cooperation and real-time exchange of intelligence information, to break the network through which the arms have been getting to their destination, and also bring back the confidence of the people in the security system.

9. Weapons as the Symbol of Strength

Increasingly, firearms are being regarded as a means of authority and status, particularly in rural and crime-prone areas. According to Eyina and Kabari (2021), the colonial age influenced the development of this perception because firearms were employed during hunting and traditional ceremonies. In today's culture, arms and weapons are used as cultural adoration. Arming and the power and honor connected to it are masculine in several societies; disarming without in-depth social change in connection to violence and power is near impossible.

Capabilities/Means

1. Crisis in the Sahel Region

The Sahel region of Africa has been in a state of instability, and countries like Libya, Chad, and Niger have fallen into the cycle of conflict situations and poor state authority. Subsequent breakdown of the state formation in Libya after the crisis involving Muammar Gaddafi left a vacuum, which would liberate a massive number of weapons into the neighboring lands ([Aluko and Ajala 2021](#)). The strategic geographical position and the large (4,000 kilometer) border of Nigeria predispose Nigeria to the difficulty of spill-over of these weapons. These under-resourced systems of border control, as well as the porous nature of these borders, have led to the unregulated movement of small arms and light weapons (SALW) to the North-western region of Nigeria. This has been the regional play that has enabled the transnational crime networks and militant groups to succeed, with passages of weapons and fighters across national lines obstructing national and regional rebuilding of peace.

2. Unregulated Arms and Border Policies

The ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Goods, and Services was established to foster regional integration, but it has inadvertently enabled arms proliferation in Nigeria. Aminu (2022) highlights that the legal provisions intended for human mobility have also been exploited for illicit purposes, especially arms smuggling across the Nigeria-Niger border. Cultural and ethnic similarities among border communities in Nigeria and neighboring countries further complicate regulatory efforts and surveillance. Agwu and Ogali (2023) emphasize that transnational criminality, combined with weak enforcement and limited border profiling, allows criminal elements to bypass security measures, undermining national efforts to curb SALW proliferation. Additionally, the inability of security agencies to effectively monitor cross-border activities contributes significantly to the persistent spread of illegal arms.

3. Armed Smuggling Networks

The emergence of well-coordinated arms trafficking cartels has become a defining feature of Nigeria's security crisis. Abdulmalum et al. (2021) describe the arms trade as one of Africa's most critical security concerns, linking it directly to the rise of terrorism and organized crime. These networks exploit ECOWAS free movement policies to transport weapons under the guise of legitimate trade. Enejo et al. (2021) explain how traffickers capitalize on gaps in the system to smuggle arms alongside human trafficking operations. These networks have established routes and safe havens, with complicit individuals among border officials, making it difficult for law enforcement to intervene effectively. Salihu and Ozden (2020) also point out that Nigeria's borders have become transit hubs for illegal goods, including arms, due to poor oversight and corruption within customs and immigration systems.

4. Inadequate security manpower

The security agencies of Nigeria are already overstressed, particularly in remote and war-prone areas. Olagoge et al. (2022) note that there is a lack of trained individuals and equipment that would be able to effectively react to security threats. There is also a poor presence of security and even an absence of security in most parts of the rural setup, where criminal elements enjoy impunity. It is this vacuum that is used by the armed groups to seek to establish dominance over local populations. This breeds insecurity, which hampers investment and development, leading to a loop in security and proliferation of arms. Distrust of the state response also limits trust among the communities, and communities embrace self-help by getting themselves armed.

5. Smuggling Tactics and Weak Surveillance

The smugglers have come up with amazing ways of outsmarting the security guards, such as hiding weapons in trucks, fuel tanks, and grain bags. Mezie-Okoye (2022) and Akpan and Umelo (2020) indicate that arms find their way to the country through the use of donkeys, camels, and other unnoticeable means. Common commercial routes and vehicles are also used in transferring arms, and they exploit the fact that border officials have a small capacity to do full inspection. The border officials are usually ill-equipped and lack the training to handle cargo effectively, and corruption also further compromises the efficacy of the border operations. This fact qualifies the Nigerian borders as a key entry point for the illegal arms that are to be used in preparing a local conflict.

Summary & Conclusion

This paper has sought to explore the key contributors to the spread of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in Northwestern Nigeria, which is becoming violent because of banditry, community violence, and armed banditry. Based on a guide conceived in the theory of small arms demand advanced in a study by Jurgen and Muggah, the study evaluated the factors composed of structural, political, and socio-economic factors conditions which contribute to motivation and methods through which individuals and groups engage in obtaining SALW. The paper used relevant secondary sources of information to comprehensively state some of the main drivers of the increase in demand and accessibility of SALW in the region, which are porous borders, political instability, economic marginalization, weak state capacity, and poor governance.

It was found that proliferation of SALW is not simply a subject of security concern, but it is also a problem reflecting on other systemic failures. Arms trafficking and non-state violence have become prevalent even though the latter is tolerated by the weak government institutions in rural and border communities due to the high cases of corruption and inability to enforce the law effectively. These conditions have served as an opportunity to stockpile weapons and overwhelm the local security forces by the known armed groups, i.e., bandits, insurgents, and local militias.

Moreover, the authors revealed that economic stress, large unemployment rates among the young population, and the feeling of political marginalization can play a major role in increasing the civilian demand for guns to protect their interests or serve their purposes in organized crime and violence.

The theoretical background given by the framework of Jurgen and Muggah was quite helpful when it comes to magnifying the stacked reasons behind SALW demand in Northwestern Nigeria. Their focus on the movement of motivation (insecurity, fear, economic need) and access (availability, affordability, and access to arms markets) to arms markets, reflect well the facts recorded in the area. The shift in perspective, in the form of focus on the control of supply specifically, and thinking about why people want to own a weapon in the first place, allowed for the problem to be viewed through a more complex lens to solve it accordingly.

To conclude, both the cause and effect of the existing insecurity in Northwestern Nigeria are the spread of smoky weapons in addition to light weapons because the erratic spread of weaponry is closely connected to the elements of governance or institutional collapse, socio-economic inequality, and the lack of controlled boundaries. Attempts made to prevent arm proliferation and violence will be limited in their effects unless such root causes are tackled comprehensively. The research, accordingly, highlights the importance of a multi-dimensional approach that involves enhanced security governance patterns, communal interactions, regional co-operation, and long-term socio-economic investments to break the demand-violence cycles produced by SALW availability.

Recommendations

As a sure way of ensuring that the spread of small arms and light weapons (SALW) is effectively contained in the North-western part of Nigeria, the government should first focus on capacity building along its borders and on regional collaboration. The porous borders continue to be a major route in the smuggling of arms, and the solution to this dilemma would be coordinated action with neighboring and regional organizations like ECOWAS. Improved surveillance tools, intelligence, and patrols on the borders should be introduced. In the meantime, the security institutions in Nigeria should be radically changed. This involves modernization of tools used by workers, upgrading of the level of training, and institution of accountability measures to address cases of collusion or laxity by security agency employees.

It is also crucial to consider eliminating the background factor that pushes people and communities to demand access to weapons. The exclusion by the political representatives, financial tensions, and the lack of effective leadership establish further anger and instability in the region. The government needs to institute a multi-dimensional approach that will foster inclusive government, equitable development, and a better delivery of service. Investing in creating jobs, training, and empowering the youth, as well as creating expectations about finding good jobs, particularly in

rural and underprivileged settings, will lower the mentalities that force many of them to find a means through violence or join the armed forces. In addition, justice reforms, community policing, and transparent governance can be used to restore public trust in institutions, which can minimize the perception of the existence of the need to protect oneself by obtaining illegal weapons.

Finally, any serious attempt at disarmament should be centered on community-based initiatives. The voluntary disarmament may be achieved by involving the traditional leaders, religious institutions, civil society, and grassroots organisations in peacebuilding and sensitization campaigns in order to instill a culture of nonviolence. The social and personal effects of arm proliferation should be sensitized to the population, with the emphasis being put on people to find ways of promoting peace. In conjunction with this, controls of local gun markets have to be realized consistently and impartially, that licensed arms access should be appropriately managed, and the black market should be heavily punished. The reversal of this proliferation tide and consolidation of peace and stability of North-western Nigeria needs a holistic approach, an inclusive approach based on security reform and good governance, as well as economic empowerment and people engagement.

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