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Cross-Border Arms Trafficking and Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) in South-West Nigeria: Security Implications and Policy Responses

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) driven by cross-border trafficking has emerged as one of the most critical security threats confronting South-West Nigeria in the 21st Century. This study adopted a qualitative design to examine the nature of insecurity and the role of security education in addressing emerging security challenges in South West Nigeria. Special attention was given to evidence directly related to the six South Western states of Nigeria: Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo States. The evidence spans 2002-2026. Search terms included combinations of insecurity in South West Nigeria, kidnapping in Ogun State, kidnapping in Oyo State, insecurity in Ondo State, Amotekun, Western Nigeria Security Network, community policing, border security, Nigeria-Benin border, transnational crime, and community security. The study is anchored in Alfred Marshall's supply-demand model, complemented by three supporting perspectives: the economic theory of crime, the security dilemma, and relative deprivation. Evidence from the North East, North West and Sahel is retained in this study, but its analytical status is explicitly limited. Studies concerning Boko Haram, ISWAP, Sahelian insecurity, rural banditry and insurgency are used to establish national security. Demonstrate the changing character of insecurity in Nigeria and identify broader mechanisms such as weak intelligence systems, porous borders, inadequate inter-agency coordination, and socio-economic vulnerability. The paper recommended that sustainable arms control in the South-West demands urgent institutional reform, regional cooperation, and community engagement.

KEYWORDS: Border security • Securitisation • Light Weapons • Herder-farmer conflict • Operation Amotekun

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Introduction

The global proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) constitutes one of the most pervasive threats to human security, national stability and international peace in the 21st century (Samuel, 2021). In non-conflict areas, SALWs facilitate approximately forty-four percent of global homicides annually, and in regions of active conflict and fragile governance, they serve as the primary instruments of terrorism, insurgency, organized crime, and communal violence (UNODC, 2014). Within the African continent, and particularly in West Africa, the circulation of illicit SALWs has been dramatically amplified by decades of regional conflicts, weak border governance, institutional corruption, and the catastrophic fallout from the 2011 collapse of the Libyan state, which flooded West African and Sahelian arms markets with millions of weapons from Muammar Gaddafi's government stockpiles (UN News, 2023; UNODC, 2023).

Nigeria, as West Africa's most populous country and largest economy, sits at the epicentre of this arms proliferation crisis. There are estimated to be approximately 10,000 unarmed routes through which trans-border criminals can access and exit Nigeria at will, making the country acutely vulnerable to illicit arms inflow (Amali & Buthelezi, 2025). Security challenges in Nigeria have intensified dramatically due to the uncontrolled spread of SALWs, with banditry, terrorism, and armed conflicts increasing in frequency and ferocity as a consequence (Amali & Buthelezi, 2025). While much scholarly and policy attention has been directed at the North-East and North-West zones where Boko Haram, ISWAP, and armed bandits have deployed sophisticated weapons in large-scale campaigns of violence, the South-West geopolitical zone has simultaneously experienced a troubling escalation of SALW-fuelled insecurity that demands urgent scholarly examination. The South-West zone, comprising Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Ondo, Osun, and Ekiti states, shares an extensive and poorly monitored land border with the Benin Republic, a boundary that has historically served as a major conduit for the cross-border trafficking of arms alongside other contraband (Achumba, Ighomereho, & Akpor-Robaro, 2013; Adejo, 2005). It has been established that weapons intercepted in Nigeria have been traced to arms stockpiles from Côte d'Ivoire, former Libyan military stores, and various other regional conflict zones, demonstrating the complexity and multi-directional character of the arms trafficking networks that threaten the South-West (Conflict Armament Research, 2020; UNIDIR, 2024). SALWs trafficked through the western border have provided lethal firepower to itinerant herder groups, kidnapping syndicates, armed robbery networks, and criminal gangs that have terrorised communities across the six South-West states.

This paper provides a comprehensive analytical account of cross-border arms trafficking and SALW proliferation in South-West Nigeria. It examines the structural drivers and supply routes of illicit arms, documents the security and socioeconomic implications, evaluates existing policy frameworks and their limitations, and proposes a multi-dimensional policy agenda for sustainable arms control.

Conceptual Clarifications

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs)

The United Nations Panel of Governmental Experts (1997) provides the most widely accepted international definition of small arms and light weapons. Small arms are defined as weapons designed for individual use, including revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles, carbines, assault rifles, sub-machine guns, and light machine guns. Light weapons are defined as weapons designed for use by several persons serving as a crew, including heavy machine guns, hand-held and under-barrel grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tank guns, recoilless rifles, and portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft missile systems. SALWs are characterized by their durability, high portability, ease of concealment, simplicity of operation, extreme lethality, and capacity for legitimate military, police, and civilian use features that simultaneously account for their proliferation and their devastating impact in contexts of criminality and conflict (Small Arms Survey, 2015; Osimen et al., 2016). In the Nigerian South-West context, the most commonly trafficked and operationally deployed SALWs include AK-pattern assault rifles, locally manufactured single and double-barrel shotguns, pistols, pump-action rifles and improvised explosive

devices. Artisanal or “craft” production of firearms in local workshops also contributes to proliferation, adding a domestic supply dimension that complicates arms control efforts (Mangan & Nowak, 2019; Small Arms Survey, 2019).

Cross-Border Arms Trafficking

Cross-border arms trafficking refers to the unauthorized movement of weapons, ammunition, and related materials across international boundaries in violation of national laws and international conventions. It involves a spectrum of activities ranging from large-scale organized criminal operations managed by sophisticated transnational networks to small-scale “ant trafficking”, the movement of individual weapons or small batches across borders concealed among legitimate goods or on the person of individual carriers (UNODC, 2023; Small Arms Survey, 2019). The ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons (2006) defines illicit trafficking as the import, export, acquisition, sale, delivery, movement, or transfer of small arms or light weapons from or across the territory of one country to that of another without authorization by any state concerned.

Security Implications

Security implications of SALW proliferation are understood in this paper within a broad human security framework that involves physical, economic, food, health, political, community, and personal security dimensions (UNDP, 1994). The availability of SALWs in South-West communities amplifies the lethality of pre-existing conflicts, enables new forms of organised criminal enterprise, deters productive economic activity, undermines institutional trust, and generates cycles of retaliatory violence that are difficult to break without comprehensive security and developmental interventions (Abiodun et al., 2018; Atidoga et al., 2024).

Historical Context of Arms Trafficking in South-West Nigeria

The contemporary SALW proliferation crisis in South-West Nigeria requires historical perspective. The origins of the problem trace back to the post-Cold War era of the 1990s, when the ending of Cold War proxy conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau and Côte d’Ivoire released massive quantities of weapons into West African circulation (Onuoha, 2011; Aghedo & Osumah, 2014). Nigeria’s western border with the Benin Republic, itself a major regional transit hub, became an important channel through which weapons from these conflicts entered Nigerian territory. Armed robbery networks, ethnic militias, and community security groups in the South-West began acquiring these weapons, transforming the security landscape of what had previously been a relatively stable zone. (Akinlade et. al. 2025)

The 1990s also witnessed the collapse of border enforcement capacity during prolonged military rule in Nigeria. Corruption within customs, immigration and police agencies created systematic pathways for arms trafficking alongside other smuggling activities (Okolie-Osemene, 2019). The transition to democratic governance in 1999 did not fundamentally reverse this institutional deficit, as border management agencies remained chronically underfunded and plagued by corruption. The 2006 adoption of the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons represented a significant normative advance in regional arms governance, but its practical implementation in Nigeria remained incomplete, with bills to establish the National Commission on Small Arms (NATCOM-SALW) languishing in the National Assembly from the 7th Assembly without passage (PLAC, 2021; ECOWAS Convention, 2006).

The decisive intensification of the SALW proliferation problem came after 2011, with the NATO intervention in Libya and the subsequent collapse of the Gaddafi State. Tuareg soldiers serving in the Libyan army looted weapons from government stockpiles and returned to Mali, triggering a series of rebellions that created a dangerous security vacuum across the Liptako-Gourma trans-border area (UN News, 2023; International Affairs Review, 2023). Extremist groups including Boko Haram, ISWAP, and JNIM captured military and police bases across the Sahel, adding fresh weapons to their expanding arsenals. According to the UNODC (2023), weapons seizures in the Sahel-West Africa region increased by 105 percent between 2017 and 2021, reflecting the massive scale of arms circulation. The South-West’s

proximity to the Benin Republic, bordering Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger through transit corridors, made it a downstream destination for weapons originating from these Sahelian conflict zones (Mangan & Nowak, 2019; Small Arms Survey, 2019). In 2020, the Conflict Armament Research (CAR) examined 148 factory-produced weapons in Northern Nigeria and found that some had commonalities with small arms previously in service with national defence forces in Côte d'Ivoire, with four weapons traced directly to Nigerian defence and security forces' stockpiles (CAR, 2020; UNODC, 2023). This evidence of weapons diversion from national armed forces added a critical domestic dimension to Nigeria's arms supply problem, indicating that illicit weapons do not enter exclusively from external sources but also leak from official security stocks through corruption, battlefield capture and theft.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the supply-demand model of Alfred Marshall (1890), complemented by three supporting perspectives: the economic theory of crime, the security dilemma, and relative deprivation. The Marshallian model is the principal frame because it allows the proliferation of SALWs to be analysed as the outcome of two forces, the availability of weapons (supply) and the desire and ability to acquire them (demand), and it indicates what arms control must therefore address.

Marshall's Supply-Demand Model (1890)

Alfred Marshall's *Principles of Economics* (1890) underpins modern price theory. Its central proposition is that the price and quantity of any commodity are determined jointly by the schedule of what buyers are willing to purchase at each price (demand) and the schedule of what sellers are willing to offer at each price (supply). Marshall compared the two forces to the blades of a pair of scissors: neither alone cuts, and it is pointless to ask which one is responsible. Equilibrium is reached where the two meet, and any change in the conditions behind either curve produces a new equilibrium. Four postulates of the model matter most for this study. First, under the law of demand, buyers take less of a good as its price rises, other things equal. Second, under the law of supply, sellers offer more as price rises because higher returns draw more resources into production and trade. Third, demand and supply are not fixed; they shift when underlying conditions such as tastes, expectations, income, technology or costs change. Fourth, the responsiveness of quantity to price, which Marshall formalised as elasticity, determines how far any intervention moves price as against quantity. Marshall also distinguished the market period, the short run and the long run, observing that supply adjusts more fully as more time is allowed, and he introduced consumer surplus to capture the gap between what a buyer is prepared to pay and what is actually paid.

Table 1 links these concepts to SALWs.

Table 1: *Marshallian Concepts and Their Application to Small Arms and Light Weapons*

Marshallian concept	Meaning in Principles of Economics	Application to SALWs
Law of demand	Quantity demanded varies inversely with price, other things equal	Fewer weapons are acquired when prices rise; more when they fall (e.g., cheap surplus rifles after a regional conflict)
Law of supply	Quantity offered rises with price as higher returns draw in more suppliers	Higher prices attract smugglers, corrupt custodians and local fabricators into the trade
Equilibrium price	The price at which quantity demanded equals quantity supplied	The street price of a rifle or ammunition at which illicit buyers and sellers clear
Shifts in demand and supply	Changes in tastes, income, expectations or costs move the whole curve	Rising insecurity shifts demand right; border interdiction shifts supply left
Price elasticity of demand	Responsiveness of quantity demanded to price change	Demand for weapons held for protection or violence is relatively inelastic, so supply controls alone raise prices more than they cut quantity
Time periods (market, short-run, long-run)	Supply adjusts more fully the longer the time allowed	Stocks are fixed in the market period; trafficking routes adjust in the short run; local production capacity in the long run
Consumer surplus	Gap between what a buyer would pay and what is paid	Buyers who value security or violent gain highly will pay far above the market price

Marshallian concept	Meaning in Principles of Economics	Application to SALWs
Ceteris paribus	Isolating one cause by holding others constant	Allows separate analysis of supply-side and demand-side drivers of proliferation

Supply-Side Determinants of Proliferation

On the supply side, the model focuses on everything that lowers the cost of getting weapons into a market. In the Nigerian context, the literature and official accounts point to several channels: porous land borders with Benin, Niger, Chad and Cameroon that run for about 4,470 kilometres (Business Day, n.d.); leakage from State armouries through corruption, theft and diversion; the spill-over of weapons from neighbouring conflict zones; and artisanal local fabrication. Stohl and Grillot (2009) describe how legal and illicit supply chains overlap, so that weapons legally produced and transferred are later diverted into the illicit market. Each channel lowers the marginal cost of supply and shifts the supply curve to the right, which, for a given level of demand, lowers the price and increases the quantity in circulation. Empirical support for the supply logic comes from Killicoat (2007), who built a simultaneous-equations demand and supply model of the market for Kalashnikov assault rifles and found that variables proxying the height of trade barriers were consistently significant in explaining weapon prices, and that neighbours' military expenditure was a robust predictor of cheap weapons. This indicates that the market for small arms responds to ordinary price mechanisms and that its determinants can be identified and, in principle, influenced.

Demand-Side Determinants of Proliferation

On the demand side, weapons are not wanted for their own sake. They are acquired as instruments of protection, predation, political leverage or group identity. Marshall's attention to tastes and expectations is therefore central. Where citizens expect the state to be unable to protect them, the perceived value of a weapon rises, and the demand curve shifts to the right. The security dilemma (Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978) explains the mechanism: steps that one party takes to secure itself are read by others as threats, prompting counter-acquisition, so that insecurity breeds demand for arms and arms in turn deepen insecurity. At the community level this appears in vigilante formation, communal self-defence and ethnic militia armament.

Demand is also driven by grievance and opportunity. Gurr (1970) argued that relative deprivation, the gap between what people believe they deserve and what they can obtain, creates a readiness for collective violence. Where unemployment and poverty are widespread, the opportunity cost of joining armed groups is low, and weapons become a means of livelihood through banditry, kidnapping and armed robbery. Becker (1968) supplies a related logic: an individual commits an offence when the expected benefit exceeds the expected cost, which depends on the probability of apprehension and the severity of punishment. Weak enforcement lowers expected cost and raises demand for the tools of crime. Electoral violence connects here too, as political actors who buy votes or hire thugs create a derived demand for weapons.

Market Equilibrium, Elasticity and the Limits of Supply Controls

Figure 1 illustrates the model. A rise in insecurity shifts demand from D_0 to D_1 and moves the market from E_0 to E_1 , raising both price and quantity. Supply-side arms control, such as border interdiction and stockpile security, shifts supply from S_0 to S_1 and moves the market to E_2 , where price is higher still but quantity is only modestly reduced.

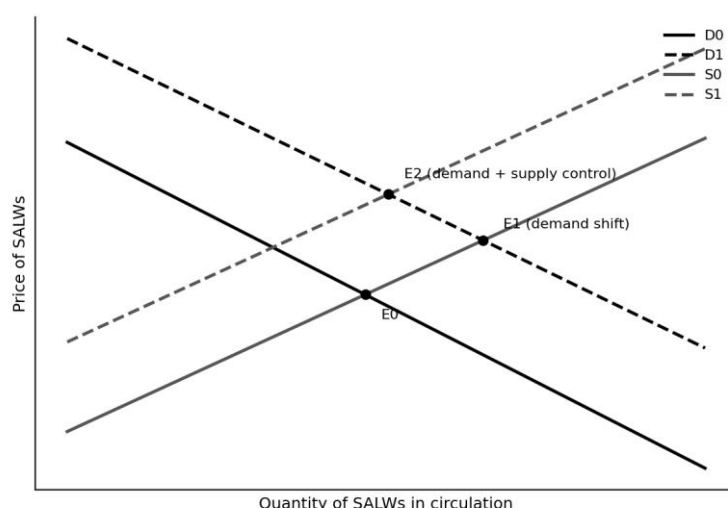


Figure 1: Marshallian Supply and Demand Shifts in the Market for SALWs

Note. Adapted from the supply-demand model of Marshall (1890). E0 is the initial equilibrium. Curves are illustrative, not estimated.

The reason for this outcome lies in elasticity. For buyers who hold a weapon for survival or to commit violence, the good has few substitutes, so demand is relatively inelastic: a price increase reduces purchases only slightly. Supply-side enforcement therefore works mainly by raising prices and risk premiums, which may help to deter casual and poorer buyers but does little to dislodge determined ones. The time dimension adds a further complication. In the short run, interdiction on one route may only displace trafficking to another; in the long run, higher prices encourage local production, which reduces dependence on imports. The model therefore justifies a combined approach in which supply controls are paired with measures that shift demand to the left. Marshall's own assumptions, including rational buyers, reasonably free entry and adequate information, hold only loosely in illicit markets, where contracts are enforced through trust or violence, so the model is used here as an organising logic rather than as a precise predictor.

What Arms Control Requires

Reading the model in reverse yields the requirements of arms control. Hence, policy must act on the supply curve, the demand curve, and the institutional conditions under which the market operates. The Programme of Action on illicit SALWs (United Nations, 2001), the International Tracing Instrument (United Nations, 2005), the Arms Trade Treaty (United Nations, 2013) and the ECOWAS Convention (ECOWAS, 2006) together set out much of the supply-side agenda: marking and record-keeping, tracing, export and brokering controls, stockpile management and destruction of surplus. Greene and Marsh (2012) argue that effective governance of small arms must also address the armed violence those weapons enable, and not merely the movement of hardware which was discussed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Arms Control Requirements and Their Expected Market Effects

Dimension	What arms control requires	Market effect (Marshallian logic)
Supply-side controls	Border and customs control; export, import and brokering licensing; marking, record-keeping and tracing; stockpile security and management of state armouries; regulation of local gunsmiths; destruction of surplus weapons and seized arms	Shifts the supply curve left, raising price and reducing quantity at any given demand
Demand-side measures	Improved public security and community policing; disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration; voluntary surrender and amnesty; livelihood and youth-employment programmes; security education that changes attitudes to weapons	Shifts the demand curve left (or reduces willingness to pay), lowering price and quantity
Legal and institutional framework	Domestic legislation harmonised with the	Raises the cost and risk of trade; stabilises the

Dimension	What arms control requires	Market effect (Marshallian logic)
Cooperation and information	ECOWAS Convention, the UN Programme of Action and the Arms Trade Treaty; a functioning national commission with research and coordination mandates	market environment
	Inter-agency and cross-border collaboration; regional databases; data on prices, seizures and stocks	Reduces information gaps that let illicit markets clear cheaply

Two points follow. First, supply-side instruments are necessary but insufficient where demand is inelastic and driven by insecurity. Second, demand reduction depends on restoring trust in public security and on changing the values, attitudes and knowledge that lead people to see weapons as a solution.

Justification and Application of the Framework to the Study

The Marshallian framework is justified for this study on four grounds. First, it is parsimonious and organises a complex problem into two analysable sets of causes, which allows each factor examined in the study to be classified as a supply-side or demand-side determinant of proliferation. Second, it is empirically grounded, since price-based analysis of the small arms market (Killicoat, 2007) shows that the market responds to identifiable determinants. Third, it is policy-relevant, because it shows why arms control targeting only supply has limited effect and where complementary action is needed. Fourth, it is compatible with the supporting perspectives: the security dilemma and relative deprivation explain why demand arises, and the economic theory of crime explains why weak enforcement sustains it. In application, the study treats variables such as border porosity, weak stockpile management, corruption and local fabrication as supply-side factors that shift the supply curve rightward, and variables such as perceived insecurity, grievance, unemployment and attitudes towards weapon ownership as demand-side factors that shift the demand curve rightward. The study further holds that security education operates on the demand side of the market. By improving knowledge of the risks and legal consequences of weapon possession, building a culture of peace and strengthening community-level security awareness, it changes the tastes and expectations that underlie demand and reduces willingness to pay for weapons. In Marshall's terms, it shifts the demand curve to the left, producing a fall in both price and quantity that supply controls on their own cannot achieve when demand is inelastic. The framework therefore explains why small arms proliferate, provides a rationale for studying both sides of the market, and offers a theoretical basis for recommending that arms control in Nigeria combine tighter supply controls with demand-reducing measures, including security education in schools and communities.

Supply Routes and Dynamics of Arms Trafficking into South-West Nigeria

The most significant supply route for SALWs entering South-West Nigeria runs through the Nigeria-Benin Republic border, which stretches over 700 kilometres through communities in Ogun, Oyo, and Kwara states. The border has numerous informal crossing points and dense forest corridors that available border security resources cannot comprehensively monitor (Blum, 2014; Eselebo & Okunade, 2021). The Idiroko border crossing in Ogun State has been specifically identified by research as a major transit point for arms trafficking alongside other forms of smuggling (IJRISS, 2024). Weapons intercepted at or near the Nigeria-Benin border have been traced back to conflict zones in Côte d'Ivoire, suggesting trafficking networks that move arms eastward through Benin into Nigeria's western states (Odey. et al. al, 2022). The shared ethno-linguistic heritage of Yoruba communities on both sides of the Nigeria-Benin border facilitates the social infrastructure of cross-border arms trafficking. The Nigeria-Benin border cuts across communities with longstanding cultural, linguistic, and kinship connections. Yoruba-speaking populations live on both sides of the border and the border does not necessarily correspond to the local boundaries recognised by local communities; the cultural and economic relationships and that people frequently cross the border to interact with relatives and business associates (Aluko 2012). Deep family, commercial, and cultural networks across the border enable traffickers to embed weapon movements within legitimate cross-border social and commercial interactions, making detection significantly more difficult for border security agencies (Blum, 2014; Osimen et al., 2017). Weapons are frequently

transported in small shipments concealed in commercial vehicles, on motorcycles (okada), in food consignments, or on the persons of individual carriers a pattern the UNODC (2023) refers to as “ant trafficking”, which is far more difficult to interdict than large-scale organised shipments. There is Nigerian institutional evidence. The National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCCSALW 2023) was established in Nigeria in 2021 to strengthen national control of illicit small arms and light weapons. The centre has emphasised interagency collaboration and intelligence sharing to combat illegal arms trafficking; the policy introduced seizures in which firearms and ammunition were concealed inside ordinary commercial goods, including doors, furniture, plumbing fittings and leather bags. This provides direct Nigerian evidence for the broader proposition that traffickers exploit legitimate goods and transport arrangements to conceal firearms

In addition to the land border, South-West Nigeria’s extensive coastline along the Gulf of Guinea provides a maritime arms-trafficking corridor that is similarly difficult to monitor effectively. Nigeria’s maritime borders with Equatorial Guinea and São Tomé and Príncipe, combined with the activities of organized criminal networks operating in the Gulf of Guinea, enable the covert movement of weapons by sea into the South-West coastal communities of Lagos and Ondo states (Onuoha, 2013; Alemika, 2013). The Nigerian Navy and the Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA) have limited capacity to patrol Nigeria’s entire maritime frontier, leaving significant vulnerabilities that arms trafficking networks exploit (IMO, 2021). Despite Nigeria’s efforts to strengthen maritime security through the Nigerian Navy, NIMASA and the Deep Blue Project, significant challenges remain in achieving comprehensive maritime surveillance and interagency coordination across the country’s extensive maritime domain. The International Maritime Organisation’s capacity-building initiatives in Nigeria have specifically focused on identifying maritime security gaps, strengthening institutional coordination and developing national maritime security capabilities (IMO, 2021).

Once SALWs enter the South-West through external border channels, their distribution within the zone occurs through established internal criminal networks. Weapons markets, both open and covert, exist in border communities and major urban centres, where SALWs are available for purchase alongside locally manufactured weapons from artisanal workshops (Mangan & Nowak, 2019). Olanrewaju et al. (2022) document how weak legislation and non-state armed actors amplify arms proliferation through these internal distribution networks. The availability of SALWs is further augmented by the diversion of weapons from official security agencies through corruption, theft, and the sale of confiscated weapons by compromised security personnel (UNIDIR, 2024).

A dimension of the SALW supply problem that is sometimes overlooked in policy discourse is the contribution of local artisanal or “craft” production of firearms in illegal workshops across the South-West. Locally manufactured weapons, including single and double-barrel shotguns, crude pistols, and improvised devices, are produced in workshops in rural and urban communities across the zone (Small Arms Survey, 2019; Mangan & Nowak, 2019). While these locally produced weapons are generally less sophisticated and lethal than factory-produced SALWs, they are widely accessible, affordable, and difficult to trace, making them an important element of the broader arms proliferation landscape in the South-West.

Security Implications of SALWs Proliferation in South-West Nigeria

Escalation of Herder-Farmer Conflicts

Perhaps the most devastating security consequence of SALWs proliferation in the South-West has been the dramatic escalation of herder-farmer conflicts across the zone. Research demonstrates that the proliferation of SALWs in the Sahel and West Africa, combined with the scope of cross-border migration by nomadic pastoralists, has fundamentally transformed what were previously disputes over land and water resources into lethal armed confrontations with significant casualties (Oghuvbu, 2020). In the Oke-Ogun area of Oyo State, herder-farmer conflicts fuelled by the availability of SALWs have resulted in deaths, displacement, and the complete abandonment of farmlands by crop farmers, with direct and

measurable consequences for agricultural income and food security (Olaniyi, 2015). The proliferation of SALWs has fundamentally altered the power dynamics of herder-farmer disputes. What historically manifested as confrontations involving machetes, bows and arrows, and other traditional weapons has transformed, following the availability of AK-pattern assault rifles and other military-grade weapons, into asymmetric armed confrontations in which pastoralist groups with superior firepower impose devastating casualties on farming communities (Oladoyin et al. al, 2021). The Conflict Armament Research's analysis of Nigeria's herder-farmer conflict (2020) specifically documented the types and origins of weapons deployed in these confrontations, providing empirical evidence of the link between arms trafficking routes and the lethal character of South-West conflicts.

Kidnapping, Banditry and Armed Robbery

SALWs have directly enabled the dramatic escalation of kidnapping for ransom, armed banditry, and highway robbery in the South-West. Armed with assault rifles and other military-grade weapons trafficked through the western border, kidnapping syndicates operate along major South-West highways including the Sagamu-Ore-Benin Expressway, Ondo-Akure Road, and Ibadan-Oyo-Ogbomosho corridor with a level of firepower that overwhelms unarmed or lightly armed community security responders (Adeyemi, 2025; Vanguard, 2022). The National Bureau of Statistics (2024) reported that Nigerians paid N2.23 trillion in kidnapping ransoms between May 2023 and April 2024, with the South-West recording approximately 6.9 million crime incidents during the same period a scale of criminal activity that would be structurally impossible without the widespread availability of SALWs.

Armed robbery along South-West highways and in peri-urban communities has similarly been transformed by SALWs availability. Criminal gangs equipped with assault rifles and pump-action shotguns attack commuters, commercial vehicles, petrol stations, banks and markets with a lethal efficiency that dwarfs the capabilities of earlier generations of armed robbers. The lethality of these attacks and the fear they generate have significant chilling effects on commercial activity, freedom of movement, and economic investment across the zone.

Cultism and Ritual Killing

The proliferation of SALWs has also intensified the activities of cult groups and criminal fraternities in South-West Nigeria, particularly in urban and peri-urban communities across Lagos, Ogun, and Oyo states. Armed cult groups, including Eiye, Aiye (Black Axe), and their offshoots, use trafficked weapons to enforce territorial control, settle inter-cult rivalries, intimidate communities, and eliminate witnesses or perceived informants (Abiodun et al., 2018). The ready availability of SALWs through border trafficking networks has transformed what were previously machete-and-knife-based cult conflicts into gun battles with significant fatalities. Additionally, criminal networks deploying SALWs have intensified ritual killing activities, particularly the abduction and murder of individuals for ritual purposes across the South-West, generating pervasive terror in rural and suburban communities.

Implications for Food Security

The SALW-fuelled insecurity in the South-West has devastating food security implications. Farmers across Ogun, Ekiti, Osun, and Ondo states have reported being unable to access their farms due to the fear of armed attack, kidnapping, and murder by well-armed criminal groups occupying farming corridors (Akinbile et al. al 2024). A study of Oke-Ogun in Oyo State documented a measurable decline in crop farmers' income directly attributable to herder-farmer conflict fuelled by the availability of SALWs, with farmers abandoning crops in the field rather than risk being killed while harvesting them. This SALW-driven disruption of agricultural production in the South-West exacerbates national food insecurity, drives up food prices, and pushes rural farming households into deeper poverty (Adelaja et al., 2019).

Erosion of State Authority and Social Trust

The widespread availability of SALWs among non-state actors in South-West Nigeria fundamentally challenges the State's constitutional monopoly on the legitimate use of force. When armed herder groups, kidnapping syndicates, and criminal gangs possess firepower equal to or exceeding that of local police and community security agencies, they critically undermine the foundational premise of the social contract: that the State will protect citizens in exchange for their compliance (Beland, 2007; Amali & Buthelezi, 2025). Research documents that SALW-possessing groups have maintained political instability by undermining democratic processes and fuelling political tension at the community level (Amali & Buthelezi, 2025). Communities that cannot rely on the State for protection are compelled to either arm themselves, displacing the state's security function, or submit to the de facto authority of armed groups, both of which further erode the legitimacy and effectiveness of formal State institutions.

Existing Policy Responses

The ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons (2006)

The primary regional legal framework governing SALWs in West Africa is the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials, adopted on June 14, 2006, and entering into force on September 29, 2009, following ratification by nine member states, including Nigeria (Weapons Law Encyclopedia, 2017; ECOWAS Convention, 2006). The Convention is a legally binding instrument regulating the manufacture, trade, possession, and disposal of small arms and light weapons, firearms, ammunition, and related materials across the fifteen-member ECOWAS bloc. It built on the earlier 1998 ECOWAS Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation and Manufacture of Light Weapons, which, being voluntary, proved largely ineffective because most states failed to comply (Okeke & Oji, 2014; Florquin & Berman, 2005). The 2006 Convention established significantly stronger mechanisms, including provisions for national commissions, national action plans, and sub-regional cooperation frameworks to implement its prohibitions and controls. It was transformed into a legally binding instrument through sustained civil society advocacy across the region (Oxfam, 2007; Osimen et al., 2016). However, despite Nigeria's ratification, the domestication of the Convention through national legislation has remained deeply incomplete. Bills to establish an independent National Commission on Small Arms and Light Weapons (NATCOM-SALW) were introduced in the Nigerian House of Representatives in 2018 and the Senate in 2020, but had not been enacted into law as of 2021 (PLAC, 2021). This legislative gap significantly weakens Nigeria's capacity to implement the Convention's requirements at the national and state levels.

Nigeria's Firearms Act and Regulatory Framework

Nigeria's primary domestic legislation on arms control is the Firearms Act (Cap. F28, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004), which regulates the possession, importation, manufacture, and use of firearms. The Act requires individuals to obtain licences to possess firearms and imposes penalties for unlicensed possession. However, the practical enforcement of the Firearms Act in the South-West context has been severely constrained by multiple institutional factors: inadequate manpower in the Nigeria Police Force (estimated at a ratio of approximately 1 officer to 650 Nigerians, far below the UN-recommended 1:460); limited forensic capacity for weapons tracing; corruption within enforcement agencies; and the simple practical difficulty of confiscating weapons from determined armed groups in a context of widespread SALW availability (The Cable, 2025; Abiodun et al., 2018). The Inspector-General of Police's 2023 suspension of firearm licence issuance reflects the institutional confusion surrounding civilian arms governance in Nigeria (UNIDIR, 2024).

Operation Amotekun and Community-Based Responses

The establishment of the Western Nigeria Security Network (Operation Amotekun) on January 9, 2020, by the six South-West State governors represented the most significant subnational security policy response to the insecurity crisis, including SALW-fuelled violence in the zone's recent history (Omitola,

2024; Olubade & Ogunnoiki, 2020). Amotekun's mandate includes patrolling communities vulnerable to armed attacks, gathering intelligence on criminal networks, collaborating with federal security agencies, and providing rapid response to violent incidents. In Oyo State, Amotekun collaborated with local security structures to arrest suspected bandits in Kajola Local Government Area in 2021, and the corps has progressively built intelligence networks in border-adjacent rural communities (Channels Television 2021). The empirical evidence on the effectiveness of the Western Nigeria Security Network (WNSN), popularly known as Amotekun, is emerging but remains more limited than claims of broad security effectiveness might suggest. Ojiezele and Abrifor (2026), in a mixed-methods study conducted in Ondo State, found statistically significant reductions in crime following the deployment of Amotekun, including reported reductions in kidnapping, armed robbery and farmer-herder conflicts. The study drew on 800 respondents and 45 key informant interviews and identified improved local surveillance, faster responses and increased public trust as important outcomes. However, they also identified inadequate funding, weak inter-agency coordination, and ambiguous legal authority as ongoing constraints. Consequently, the finding provides evidence of an association between Amotekun deployment and improvements in selected crime indicators, but it does not constitute direct evidence that Amotekun has significantly reduced the trafficking, circulation or availability of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) in South West Nigeria. This distinction matters because evidence on Amotekun's specific effect on SALW proliferation remains comparatively thin. Existing studies tend to evaluate Amotekun in terms of general insecurity, kidnapping, armed robbery, farmer-herder conflict, community surveillance and public perceptions rather than through direct measurements of arms trafficking routes, firearm seizures, illicit weapons markets, stockpiles or changes in arms availability. For example, the 2026 study evaluated changes in crime and community security but does not measure changes in SALW flows. Similarly, Awopeju, Abimbola and Olamiji Rasheed (2026), using survey data from Ogun, Osun and Ondo States, found a statistically significant relationship between WNSN activities and perceived changes in insecurity, but characterised its effectiveness as partial, rather than demonstrating a measurable reduction in illicit arms flows. Thus, it is more defensible to argue that Amotekun may contribute to detecting and disrupting armed criminality, while evidence of its direct impact on the wider SALW supply chain remains insufficiently established.

The political and constitutional dimensions also require consideration. Amotekun emerged within Nigeria's highly centralised security architecture and consequently generated significant federal-regional tensions. The constitutional controversy centres particularly on Section 214(1) of the 1999 Constitution, which provides for the Nigeria Police Force and states that no other police force shall be established for the Federation or any part thereof. At the same time, Section 14(2) (b) identifies the security and welfare of citizens as a primary purpose of government. This tension created competing interpretations of whether state-sponsored security organisations such as Amotekun constitute an impermissible alternative police force or a lawful supplementary security arrangement.

The federal regional disagreement was particularly visible when the Federal Government, through the then Attorney General of the Federation, initially declared the establishment of Amotekun illegal, while South West governors and other regional stakeholders rejected that position and defended the initiative as a response to insecurity. Subsequent negotiations resulted in a framework under which Amotekun operated as state-based security organisations intended to complement, rather than replace, the Nigeria Police Force. Scholarly analysis therefore places Amotekun within the broader Nigerian debate over State policing, federalism and the decentralisation of internal security. The initiative also has a political and identity dimension. Ojiezele and Abrifor's empirical study on the emergence of Amotekun found that, alongside its security rationale, some evidence connected its formation with Yoruba socio-political aspirations and ethnic identity, and the study called for clearer legal arrangements to prevent jurisdictional conflicts with federal security agencies. Nwoko (2024) similarly situates Amotekun within debates about the failures of centralised policing, regional security and restructuring of the Nigerian federation. These perspectives do not establish that Amotekun is inherently ethnic or politically partisan; rather, they demonstrate that its regional and Yoruba identity has been an important part of the political discourse surrounding the organisation. Concerns about politicisation should therefore also be treated

cautiously and attributed rather than presented as established fact, including claims that political actors had used recruitment for patronage. These are reported allegations, not independently established findings, and should therefore not be presented as evidence that the organisation as a whole is politically controlled

For a SALW-focused study, the implication is that Amotekun should be assessed as a complementary local security mechanism rather than as a comprehensive arms control institution. Its strengths lie principally in local intelligence, surveillance, community engagement and rapid response to conventional security threats. Its capacity to address SALW proliferation at source is more constrained because illicit arms trafficking involves cross-border networks, organised criminal markets, firearms acquisition, storage, transportation and transnational supply chains that extend beyond the jurisdiction and operational mandate of a state-based security organisation. Indeed, the 2026 evidence on Amotekun's general effectiveness does not provide sufficient empirical evidence to conclude that it has substantially altered SALW trafficking or arms availability in South West Nigeria. This distinction strengthens rather than weakens the argument that Amotekun can contribute to security while still facing structural limitations in addressing the broader SALW problem. The corps operates primarily as a reactive law-enforcement adjunct rather than a proactive arms-control institution. Its personnel are frequently outgunned by criminal actors who possess military-grade assault rifles trafficked through border networks, while Amotekun officers are armed primarily with pump-action shotguns and similar lighter weapons. The absence of a legal framework empowering Amotekun to conduct systematic weapons seizure and destruction operations further limits its effectiveness as an anti-SALWs instrument (Amodu et al., 2020; The Cable, 2025).

International and UNODC Cooperation

At the international level, Nigeria has engaged with UNODC, INTERPOL, and other international bodies in arms trafficking interdiction efforts. UNODC's regional anti-trafficking operations in West Africa, including joint investigations and cross-border cooperation initiatives, have achieved periodic successes in disrupting specific trafficking networks (UN News, 2023). However, the scale of the arms trafficking problem far exceeds the capacity of current international cooperation frameworks to address comprehensively, particularly given the massive expansion of Sahelian arms markets following the Libyan conflict and subsequent regional instability.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a comprehensive analytical examination of cross-border arms trafficking and the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) in South-West Nigeria. Drawing on verified scholarly literature, institutional reports, and field documentation spanning 2002 to 2026, the paper has established that SALWs proliferation, driven substantially by cross-border trafficking through the Nigeria-Benin Republic border corridor, compounded by Sahelian arms market dynamics following the 2011 Libyan collapse, and amplified by internal redistribution networks and local craft production, constitutes a primary structural driver of the South-West's escalating insecurity crisis. The security implications are severe and wide-ranging: SALWs have escalated herder-farmer conflicts from traditional weapon confrontations to devastating armed battles in Ogun, Oyo, Ondo, and Ekiti states; enabled sophisticated kidnapping syndicates that have extracted trillions of naira in ransoms from South-West communities; empowered armed robbery and banditry networks that have paralysed major commercial highways; fuelled cult violence in urban centres; disrupted agricultural production and food security; and eroded State authority and social trust across the zone.

The supply-demand model theoretical framework was particularly useful because it directs policy attention to both dimensions simultaneously. Effective arms control requires not only supply-side interventions, border enforcement, international cooperation and seizure operation but also demand side not only supply-side interventions border enforcement, international cooperation, seizure operations but also demand-side measures that reduce the incentives and conditions driving SALW acquisition.

Existing policy responses, including the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms (2006), Nigeria's Firearms Act, and Operation Amotekun, have achieved partial successes but remain fundamentally inadequate to the scale and complexity of the problem. The way forward requires a comprehensive, multi-layered policy agenda that combines urgent domestication of the ECOWAS Convention through NATCOM-SALW legislation, technological upgrade of border surveillance infrastructure, strengthened bilateral and multilateral arms control cooperation, systematic weapons collection and destruction programmes, targeted socioeconomic development of border communities to address demand-side drivers, and sustained public education on the dangers of SALWs possession. Above all, this agenda requires sustained political will and intergovernmental collaboration that matches the urgency of a crisis that continues to claim lives, destroy livelihoods, and undermine the security and development of one of Nigeria's most strategically important geopolitical zones. The time for incremental, piecemeal responses has passed; what is needed now is a transformative, well-resourced, and comprehensively coordinated arms control strategy for South-West Nigeria.

Recommendations

Urgent Domestication of the ECOWAS Convention

The most urgent legislative priority for addressing SALW proliferation in South-West Nigeria and the country as a whole is to pass legislation establishing the National Commission on Small Arms and Light Weapons (NATCOM-SALW) to domesticate Nigeria's obligations under the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms (2006). The National Assembly should treat this as a matter of national security emergency and enact the relevant bills without further delay (PLAC, 2021; Okeke & Oji, 2014). A functional NATCOM-SALW would provide the institutional infrastructure to coordinate national arms management policies, establish a national weapons registry, implement marking and tracing systems, conduct stockpile security assessments, and oversee voluntary weapons surrender and destruction programmes. Without this foundational institutional architecture, all other arms control efforts will remain fragmented and inadequate.

Technological Upgrade of Border Surveillance

The interdiction of illicit arms trafficking through South-West Nigeria's western border requires a comprehensive technological upgrade of border surveillance and enforcement infrastructure. This includes the deployment of advanced scanning technology at the Idiroko and other formal border crossings in Ogun and Oyo states, the installation of drone surveillance systems for monitoring informal border crossing points, the establishment of integrated real-time intelligence-sharing platforms linking the Nigeria Customs Service, Immigration Service, military, and police in the border zone, and the use of forensic ballistics technology for weapons tracing (Eselebo & Okunade, 2021; Awosusi & Valery, 2024). The federal government should prioritize sustained, multi-year investment in border technology as a national security imperative, with specific allocations for the Nigeria-Benin Republic border corridor that bears the heaviest burden of arms trafficking into the South-West.

Strengthened Regional Arms Control Cooperation

Given the transnational character of arms trafficking networks in West Africa, effective arms control cannot be achieved through national efforts alone. Nigeria should invest in strengthening its bilateral security cooperation with the Benin Republic on arms trafficking interdiction, including joint patrol operations, shared intelligence databases, coordinated sting operations against known trafficking networks, and harmonized prosecution frameworks for arms trafficking offences (Blum, 2014; Osimen et al., 2016). At the multilateral level, Nigeria should lead efforts to strengthen the ECOWAS arms control framework by pushing for more robust implementation and monitoring mechanisms, establishing a West African small arms tracking database, and enhancing support for national commissions in neighbouring states. Nigeria should also deepen cooperation with UNODC, INTERPOL, and the Small Arms Survey to leverage international expertise and resources in addressing the arms trafficking problem.

Weapons Collection, Disarmament and Destruction Programmes

South-West State governments, in collaboration with federal security agencies and civil society organizations, should design and implement comprehensive voluntary weapons surrender and destruction programmes targeting the South-West zone. Successful models from other post-conflict contexts, including community-based disarmament approaches that provide economic incentives for weapons surrender, can be adapted for the South-West context (Aghedo & Osumah, 2014). Operation Amotekun should be formally empowered and resourced to conduct systematic weapons confiscation operations, with clear protocols for the secure storage and eventual destruction of confiscated weapons to prevent their re-entry into circulation through corrupt diversion. An independent civil society monitoring mechanism should oversee the entire weapons surrender and destruction process to ensure transparency and prevent diversion.

Socio-economic Interventions to Reduce Demand

As the supply-demand model of SALWs makes clear, effective arms control requires addressing the demand-side conditions that motivate SALW acquisition (Amali & Buthelezi, 2025). In the South-West context, targeted socioeconomic interventions are essential to reduce the conditions of unemployment, poverty, and perceived insecurity that drive SALW demand among youth and farming communities. Federal and State governments should invest in youth employment programmes in border communities, agricultural value chain development that provides economic alternatives to criminal livelihoods, rural infrastructure, particularly roads, markets, and communication networks that reduce the economic marginalization of border zone communities, and conflict resolution and peace-building programmes that provide non-violent mechanisms for addressing the resource competition disputes that drive SALW demand among herder and farmer communities (Oghuvbu, 2020; Atidoga et al., 2024).

Education and Public Awareness

Sustainable arms control in the South-West requires a long-term public education campaign that builds community-level awareness of the dangers of SALW possession and use, the legal consequences of arms trafficking and possession, and the available mechanisms for reporting weapons sightings and trafficking activities to security agencies. Social Studies education curricula in South-West secondary schools and universities should incorporate comprehensive content on arms trafficking, its security consequences, and community responsibility for arms control (Olaniran, 2024). Religious leaders, traditional rulers, community associations, and media organizations should be engaged as partners in a sustained public education effort that reaches across the linguistic and geographic diversity of the six-state zone.

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Declarations

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