

IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROLIFERATION OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS ON INTERNAL SECURITY IN KWARA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

In recent years, the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) has become a growing threat to peace, stability, and internal security across many parts of Nigeria, including Kwara State. This study investigates the major sources and drivers of SALW proliferation, examines the roles of state and non-state actors in mitigating or exacerbating the spread of illicit weapons, and explores how the availability of SALW contributes to emerging security challenges within the state. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of this multidimensional security problem. A total sample of 384 civilian respondents was selected using stratified and simple random sampling techniques, while purposive sampling guided the selection of security officials for interviews. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS (version 25), while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis to enrich and contextualise the numerical results. Findings revealed that porous borders, artisanal gun production, political thuggery, corruption among security operatives, and the activities of criminal networks are major contributors to the proliferation of SALW in Kwara State. The study also discovered that although security agencies such as the police, military, customs, and community vigilante groups contribute to arms control, these efforts are undermined by inadequate resources, weak coordination, and institutional gaps. The availability of SALW seriously fuels armed robbery, kidnapping, cult violence, and general insecurity, thereby weakening public safety and hindering development. The study identified several state and

non-state responses, including police patrols, joint military operations, border surveillance, community vigilance groups, and public awareness campaigns. However, challenges such as limited funding, poor inter-agency collaboration, weak community engagement, and insufficient technological support persist. The study concludes that SALW proliferation is a complex and systemic issue driven by socio-economic, political, and security-related factors. It recommends strengthening border control, enhancing community-security collaboration, improving intelligence gathering, and promoting youth empowerment initiatives to reduce the demand and supply of illegal weapons in Kwara State.

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

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary international system, few issues pose a greater threat to human security and peaceful coexistence than the uncontrolled circulation of weapons among non-state actors. The spread of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) has become a critical global security concern affecting states across regions. Although these weapons are less destructive than heavy military hardware, their portability, affordability, and widespread accessibility have made them responsible for substantial levels of violence, criminality, and insecurity worldwide (Afuzie, 2025). The availability of SALW has intensified criminal activities and transformed localised disputes into protracted violent confrontations, thereby obstructing peacebuilding efforts and socio-economic development in many societies (Amali & Buthelezi, 2025; Ibrahim & Abdulqadir, 2025).

Globally, the proliferation of SALW manifests in multiple forms and contexts. In the Middle East, conflicts in Syria and Yemen have been prolonged through continuous access to small arms supplied by both state and non-state actors, enabling insurgent movements and terrorist organisations to sustain armed operations (Dadparvar & Parto, 2025). In Latin America, countries such as Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia face persistent security threats from heavily armed drug cartels whose operational capacities often challenge state security institutions (Dorcé & Miller, 2024). Likewise, in the United States, the widespread availability of firearms has contributed significantly to recurrent incidents of gun violence and mass shootings, stimulating intense international debates surrounding firearm regulation. In parts of Asia, insurgent and extremist groups operating in Afghanistan, Myanmar, and the Philippines continue to depend on SALW for insurgency, terrorism, and guerrilla warfare. These cases demonstrate that the proliferation of SALW transcends regional boundaries and represents a major global challenge to peace, stability, and security (Ahmed, 2025; Yusuf, 2025).

International organisations, particularly the United Nations (UN), have repeatedly emphasised the destructive consequences associated with SALW proliferation. According to UN assessments, these weapons account for the overwhelming majority of civilian casualties in contemporary conflicts and remain central instruments in terrorism, organised crime, insurgency, and illicit trafficking networks. Unlike weapons of mass destruction, SALW produce continuous and widespread harm through the perpetuation of armed violence, extension of conflicts, and erosion of state capacity to enforce law and order. Consequently, the international community has advanced several regulatory mechanisms, including the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) and regional initiatives such as the ECOWAS Convention on

SALW, aimed at limiting the illicit circulation of arms (Suchi, 2025; Agu, 2025). In addition, the European Union (EU) has implemented stringent arms export controls while supporting global disarmament measures, and the African Union (AU) has promoted its Silencing the Guns by 2030 agenda as part of broader efforts to reduce armed conflict across Africa (Mhandara & Makuyana, 2025).

Regional and international institutions have also intensified efforts to curb illicit arms trafficking. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), for instance, adopted the 2006 Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons to address the growing challenge of illicit arms proliferation in West Africa. Similarly, organisations such as Interpol monitor transnational arms trafficking networks. At the same time, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) implements initiatives to reduce the movement of SALW across Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Ibrahim & Abdulqadir, 2025). Beyond governmental interventions, civil society organisations, including the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) and the Control Arms Coalition, contribute significantly through advocacy, awareness creation, and campaigns promoting stronger arms control regulations (Fyanka, 2025). These collective interventions reflect an international consensus that the unchecked spread of SALW constitutes a major obstacle to global peace, security, and sustainable development.

In the African context, SALW proliferation serves as both a catalyst and a consequence of insecurity. Historical conflicts, weak institutional frameworks, porous borders, and political instability have collectively created conducive conditions for illicit arms trafficking across the continent. West Africa has been particularly affected, as weapons originating from conflict zones such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mali, and Libya have circulated into neighbouring countries. These weapons frequently fall into the possession of insurgents, militias, criminal organisations, and armed groups, thereby fueling terrorism, communal violence, coups, and civil unrest. The limited capacity of many African governments to effectively regulate the movement of arms has exacerbated governance challenges and contributed to persistent insecurity and developmental setbacks (Onibasa, 2025).

Nigeria, the most populous nation in Africa, remains significantly impacted by the proliferation of SALW. The widespread availability of these weapons has intensified several security crises, including the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East, banditry and kidnapping activities in the North-West, farmer–herder conflicts in the North-Central zone, and militancy in the Niger Delta region. Evidence suggests that illicit firearms circulating within Nigeria substantially outnumber those under the control of official security agencies, thereby strengthening criminal networks, empowering political violence, and transforming community disputes into deadly confrontations. This situation increasingly challenges the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force (Danjuma & Ali, 2025). Contributing factors include weak institutional controls, corruption within security structures, and ineffective border surveillance. Notably, Nigeria is estimated to host the majority of illicit SALW circulating in West Africa, sustained by demand from insurgent groups, militants, and organised criminal actors (Ogbue et al., 2025; Ojewale, 2025).

Kwara State, situated in North-Central Nigeria, has likewise experienced the consequences associated with SALW proliferation. Although often perceived as relatively stable compared to some neighbouring states, the state faces increasing security threats linked to the inflow and misuse of illicit weapons. Its strategic location along the border with the Republic of Benin exposes it to transnational arms trafficking activities. A notable example is the 2018

Offa bank robbery, a deadly attack that occurred in Offa Local Government Area, during which armed assailants simultaneously attacked four commercial banks, resulting in the deaths of 33 individuals, including several police officers. Reports indicated that the operation lasted approximately one hour and involved the use of explosives (Sesan, 2018). Furthermore, investigations revealed that illicit weapons worth billions of naira entered Nigeria through multiple channels over several years, including maritime routes in Lagos State and land border corridors such as the Baruten (Bukoro axis) area in Kwara State, with many of these arms remaining untraced (Idowu, 2024).

The proliferation of illicit arms in Kwara State also weakens the operational effectiveness of security agencies. Law enforcement personnel increasingly confront criminal elements equipped with advanced weaponry, creating situations in which armed groups outmatch security operatives. Incidents involving attacks on security teams, killings of vigilante personnel, and injuries inflicted on security actors illustrate how illicit firearms are used to challenge state authority (Sunday, 2025). Such developments undermine crime prevention efforts and diminish public confidence in the government's capacity to guarantee security.

Against this background, this study critically examines the implications of the proliferation of SALW for internal security in Kwara State. Specifically, it investigates the sources and drivers of illicit arms inflows, evaluates their impact on criminality and communal relations, and assesses the effectiveness of existing control measures implemented by both state and non-state stakeholders. By doing so, the study contributes to scholarly discourse while offering policy-relevant insights for security institutions, policymakers, and community leaders committed to strengthening peace and security in the state. Ultimately, the research seeks to identify sustainable pathways toward a more secure and stable Kwara State where socio-economic development can thrive without the persistent threat of armed violence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding internal security challenges in Nigeria, with specific emphasis on the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) and the roles played by state security agencies such as the Nigerian Police Force, Nigerian Military, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), and the Nigeria Customs Service in mitigating armed violence and ensuring the protection of citizens and their property. The literature suggests that the effectiveness of security responses is shaped not solely by the tactical and operational capabilities of these institutions, but also by the extent to which they enjoy legitimacy, credibility, and public confidence among the populations they serve.

Ogbue *et al.* (2025), in their examination of arms proliferation and criminal economies in Nigeria, argued that the widespread circulation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) substantially strengthened the operational capabilities of criminal organisations, including armed robbery syndicates, bandit groups, and cult-related networks. Their study demonstrated that unrestricted access to illicit firearms not only intensified violent criminal activities but also weakened the capacity and authority of security institutions, thereby posing enduring challenges to internal security governance. In a related study, Ojewale (2025) observed that the availability of illegal arms enabled criminal groups to expand their operations, execute coordinated large-scale attacks, and withstand interventions by law enforcement agencies, particularly within Nigeria's North-Central and North-West regions.

The findings further highlighted a strong relationship between SALW proliferation, youth participation in criminal activities, and the growing incidence of communal violence.

In Kwara State, contemporary scholarship has focused on notable security incidents and persistent threats associated with armed violence. Ebute (2025), through an analysis of the 2018 Offa bank robbery, widely regarded as one of the most devastating armed attacks recorded in the state, identified critical shortcomings in inter-agency coordination, despite the proximity of security operatives to the location of the incident. These institutional deficiencies were found to have contributed significantly to the scale of casualties and heightened public anxiety. Complementing this perspective, Idowu (2024) reported that, over seven years, illicit weapons valued at billions of naira entered Nigeria through multiple ports and border corridors, including routes linked to areas adjoining Kwara State. A considerable proportion of these weapons remains untraced, continuing to sustain criminal activities and reinforce insecurity within the region.

This study is grounded in the Frustration–Aggression Theory, which holds that aggressive behaviour often stems from frustration when individuals are unable to attain desired goals or fulfil important needs. Developed by John Dollard, Neal Miller, Leonard Doob, O. H. Mowrer, and Robert Sears in 1939, the theory posits that blocked aspirations generate psychological strain that may subsequently be expressed as aggression, particularly when constructive or legitimate channels for addressing grievances are limited or absent (Herasymchuk, 2025). The Frustration–Aggression Theory offers a relevant analytical lens for understanding patterns of insecurity in Kwara State, Nigeria, especially within the context of the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW). The accessibility of illicit firearms creates opportunities for frustrated individuals and organised groups, including unemployed youths, criminal networks, and armed bandits, to convert socio-economic and political grievances into violent behaviour. Such dynamics help to explain the increasing prevalence of offences such as armed robbery, kidnapping, and violent assaults on communities. From this theory's perspective, meaningful responses to insecurity require close attention to the underlying conditions that produce frustration and prompt aggressive behaviour. Structural issues such as poverty, unemployment, ineffective governance, and inadequate law enforcement contribute to an environment in which frustration accumulates. When combined with easy access to small arms, these conditions heighten the likelihood of violent expression. Consequently, the Frustration–Aggression Theory not only illuminates the behavioural foundations of armed violence but also underscores the importance of interventions that reduce socio-economic and political frustrations while restricting access to illicit weapons to address internal security challenges.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research adopts a mixed-methods approach in order to provide a broad and nuanced examination of state and non-state responses to the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Kwara State, Nigeria. Quantitative data are gathered through structured questionnaire surveys administered to civilian communities to evaluate perceptions, awareness, and levels of trust regarding security responses. Qualitative data are obtained through semi-structured interviews with security personnel across Kwara State, offering detailed insights into institutional strategies, implementation challenges, and the overall effectiveness of existing response frameworks.

Population, Sample and Sampling Techniques

The quantitative strand of this study draws its population from all residents of Kwara State, which had an estimated population of 4,259,613 in the 2020 projection by the National Bureau of Statistics. This population spans the sixteen Local Government Areas located within the three senatorial districts of Kwara Central, Kwara North, and Kwara South. To ensure equitable representation and capture the diverse security contexts within the state, purposive sampling was utilised to select six Local Government Areas: Ilorin West and Asa (Kwara Central), Baruten and Edu (Kwara North), and Offa and Irepodun (Kwara South). Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table, a total of 384 civilian respondents was selected, while stratified sampling techniques were employed across the senatorial districts to strengthen representativeness and reduce the likelihood of sampling bias. The qualitative dimension of the research involved twenty in-depth interviews with personnel from relevant security agencies, namely the Nigerian Police Force, Nigerian Army, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), and the Nigeria Customs Service. This approach enabled the study to obtain specialised insights into the strategies, operational experiences, and institutional responses of both state and non-state actors in addressing the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW).

Instrumentation

This study utilised two primary research instruments: a semi-structured interview guide and a structured questionnaire titled “*State and Non-State Responses to SALW Proliferation Questionnaire (SNSRSPQ)*”. The semi-structured interview guide was designed to elicit qualitative data from selected security personnel in Kwara State. It consisted of open-ended questions to elicit detailed insights into their roles, experiences, and operational strategies for addressing the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW). In contrast, the quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to civilian respondents across selected communities in Kwara State. The instrument comprised both closed-ended and Likert-scale items, focusing on key themes such as public awareness of SALW-related issues, perceptions of state and non-state interventions, levels of trust in security agencies, and the security challenges experienced within their respective communities.

Procedure for Data Collection

To ensure adherence to ethical research standards, informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the study. The consent process clearly outlined the research objectives, emphasised the voluntary nature of participation, and explained the measures in place to protect participants’ confidentiality and personal data, in accordance with established ethical guidelines. For the qualitative strand, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected personnel from key security agencies, including the Nigerian Police Force, Nigerian Army, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), and the Nigeria Customs Service. Data collection was facilitated using audio recording devices, notebooks, and laptop computers. Depending on participants’ availability and convenience, interviews were conducted either face-to-face in secure environments or remotely via telephone or online platforms. For quantitative data, structured questionnaires were administered to civilian residents across the selected Local Government Areas using a mixed approach, face-to-face, by phone, and online via Google Forms. To enhance data accuracy and clarity, trained research assistants were engaged to explain

questionnaire items and provide translations where necessary, thereby ensuring smooth administration and reliable responses.

Method of Data Analysis

The study adopted a mixed-methods design to investigate state and non-state responses to the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Kwara State. Qualitative data from interviews with security personnel were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns in response strategies, operational challenges, and overall effectiveness. In contrast, quantitative data collected from civilian respondents were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 22). Descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, were employed to summarise respondents' perceptions of awareness levels, trust in security institutions, and the perceived effectiveness of both state and non-state actors in addressing SALW-related insecurity. The integration of both analytical strands enabled a more comprehensive interpretation of how SALW-related security challenges are managed within Kwara State, offering a balanced understanding of both institutional responses and public perceptions.

RESULTS

Qualitative Approach

Transcription and data coding formed key elements of the qualitative approach employed to investigate state and non-state responses to Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation in Kwara State, Nigeria. During transcription, audio-recorded interviews with security personnel were carefully transcribed. This procedure captured not only participants' verbal responses but also relevant contextual cues, thereby preserving the depth, meaning, and subtle nuances embedded in their accounts. Data were systematically coded to facilitate effective organisation and categorisation of the interview material. This coding process served as the foundation for thematic analysis, enabling the identification of recurring patterns, meanings, and insights that reflect the operational realities of security actors in addressing SALW-related threats within the state.

Table 1: Code Assigned to Participants

S/N	Participants	Code Assigned
1	Nigerian Military	NM1, NM2, NM3, NM4, NM5
2	Nigerian Police Force	NP1, NP2, NP3, NP4, NP5
3	Civil Defence (NSCDC)	CD1, CD2, CD3, CD4, CD5
4	Nigerian Customs Service	NC1, NC2, NC3, NC4, NC5

Table 2: General Theme on Effectiveness of Security Responses in Kwara State

Theme One: Major sources of Small Arms and Light Weapons proliferation Sub-Themes: 1. Porous borders 2. Corruption among officials 3. Spread of locally made firearms 4. Poverty

Theme Two: State and non-state actors' contributions to controlling the proliferation of SALW

- Sub-Themes: 1. Collaboration and Intelligence Sharing
2. Enforcement of Firearms Laws
3. Border Security and Surveillance
4. Community policing

Theme Three: Proliferation of SALW and Internal Security Challenges in Kwara State

- Sub-Themes: 1. Threat to Law and Order
2. Empowerment of Criminal Networks
3. Cultism
4. Economic Instability

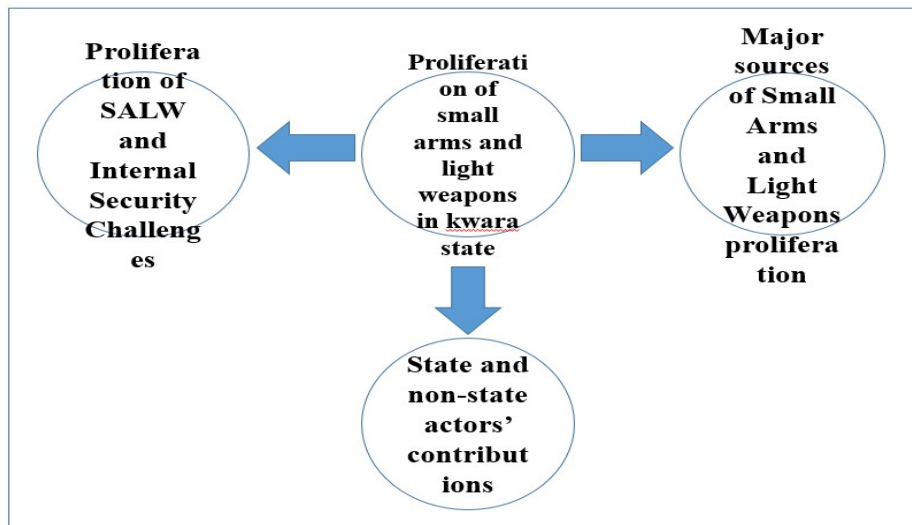


Figure 1: General Model on Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Kwara State

RESULTS

Below are some of the perspectives expressed by the participants.

Research Question 1: What are the major sources and drivers of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation in Kwara State?

Table 3: Respondents' opinions on the major sources and drivers of SALW proliferation in Kwara State, Nigeria, are presented below:

Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Porous borders	120 (31.3%)	102 (26.6%)	84 (21.9%)	78 (20.2%)
Corruption among officials	111 (28.9%)	97 (25.3%)	88 (22.9%)	88 (22.9%)
Spread of locally made firearms	106 (27.6%)	93 (24.2%)	101 (26.3%)	84 (21.9%)
Poverty	103 (26.8%)	99 (25.8%)	95 (24.7%)	87 (22.7%)

The table revealed that 120 (31.3%) of the respondents strongly agreed, 102 (26.6%) agreed, 84 (21.9%) disagreed, and 78 (20.2%) strongly disagreed that porous borders were a major driver of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation in Kwara State. This means that 222 (57.9%) generally agreed that weak border control significantly contributes to the inflow of illegal arms into the state.

The identified major sources and drivers of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation were aligned with the view of **NP1**, who expressed that:

“Lack of well-defined border controls and limited surveillance technology enables unchecked movement across borders, facilitating arms smuggling and other transnational crimes in Kwara State.”

Also, **NC1** maintains that:

Implementing modern border security technologies, such as biometric systems using fingerprint or facial recognition at entry points, would help eliminate illegal crossings, irregular migration, and cross-border crimes.”

Regarding corruption among officials, 111 (28.9%) strongly agreed, 97 (25.3%) agreed, 88 (22.9%) disagreed, and 88 (22.9%) strongly disagreed, showing that 208 (54.2%) of the respondents agreed that corruption facilitates the smuggling and distribution of illicit weapons. This is corroborated by the view of **Dike (2025)**, who affirmed that:

“Corruption and collusion among border officials further undermine efforts to secure the border. In some cases, border personnel engage in corrupt practices, accepting bribes to allow the passage of illicit goods and individuals. This not only compromises the integrity of border security but also fosters an environment where illegal activities are tolerated.”

According to **Joy (2021)**:

“Criminal networks often exploit corruption among officials, making law enforcement difficult. The Emir of Yashikeira in Baruten, Kwara State, Dr Umaru Usman, highlighted that the porous border with Benin has become a haven for bandits and kidnappers. He warned that without urgent action, the area could turn into a major criminal stronghold, similar to Sambisa Forest.”

Regarding the spread of locally made firearms, 106 (27.6%) of the respondents strongly agreed, 93 (24.2%) agreed, 101 (26.3%) disagreed, and 84 (21.9%) strongly disagreed. This indicates that 199 (51.8%) respondents agreed that locally fabricated weapons contribute to the easy availability of arms in Kwara State. Both the quantitative and qualitative analyses yielded similar results, revealing that the proliferation of locally made firearms is one of the major sources and drivers of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation in Kwara State.

NP5 argued that:

“The spread of locally made firearms in Nigeria has become increasingly alarming, contributing significantly to the rise of banditry and kidnapping in many parts of the state.”

According to **NP3**:

“Locally manufactured guns are becoming more common. These weapons are cheap, easily accessible, and often unregistered, making them a major concern for policing. Their availability has increased the rate of armed robbery, cult-related violence, and communal clashes in many parts of Kwara State.”

To buttress these reports, **CD1** affirmed that:

“The spread of locally made firearms is alarming, particularly in Kwara State, where incidents of armed robbery, cult-related violence, and banditry have become increasingly frequent. Security agencies have discovered that most of the weapons recovered from these criminal activities are locally fabricated.”

Concerning poverty, 103 (26.8%) strongly agreed, 99 (25.8%) agreed, 95 (24.7%) disagreed, and 87 (22.7%) strongly disagreed, revealing that 202 (52.6%) generally agreed that poor living conditions encourage people to engage in arms trafficking and violence as a means of survival. The findings from the qualitative analysis do not align with those of the quantitative analysis. According to **NM1 & NC5**, who argued that:

“Poor living conditions should not be seen as a justification for engaging in arms trafficking or violence as a means of survival. There are numerous legitimate ways people strive to earn a living, even in difficult circumstances. Those who choose to participate in such criminal acts reflect a lack of moral judgment.”

CD4 firmly maintained that:

“Sometimes, in the marketplace, you meet load carriers or even beggars who struggle daily to earn a living. They choose these honest means because they do not want to become victims of crime or engage in immoral acts. Their contentment with little shows that poor living conditions should never be used as an excuse for getting involved in arms trafficking or other criminal activities as a means of survival.”

In addition to the above expression, **NP4** remarks that:

“Poverty is not a license for criminality. People who are living in worse conditions still work hard to make ends meet. Engaging in arms trafficking or violence is a personal choice, not a result of poverty. It is about greed and moral decay.”

The figure below depicts the Major sources of SALW proliferation in Kwara State.

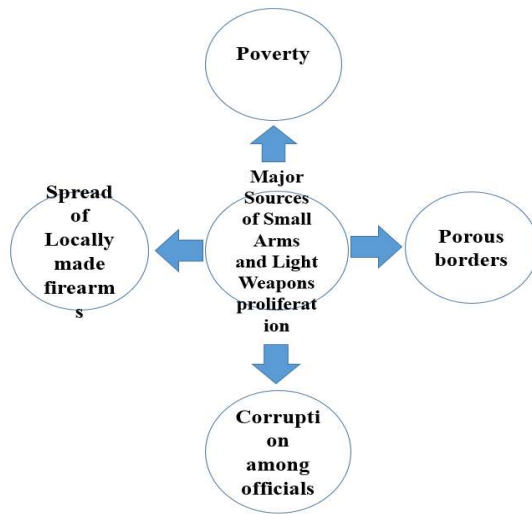


Figure 2: Perception of major sources of SALW proliferation in Kwara State

Research Question 2: How do state and non-state actors contribute to controlling the proliferation of SALW in Kwara State?

Table 4: Respondents' Opinions on the Contributions of State and Non-state Actors in Controlling the Proliferation of SALW in Kwara State, Nigeria.

Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Collaboration and Intelligence Sharing	117 (30.7%)	111 (28.6%)	83 (22.4%)	73 (18.2%)
Enforcement of Firearms Laws	113 (29.2%)	101 (26.6%)	91 (23.7%)	79 (20.5%)
Border Security and Surveillance	91 (23.9%)	81 (20.9%)	107 (27.9%)	105 (27.3%)
Community policing	111 (28.6%)	101 (26.0%)	89 (23.4%)	83 (21.9%)

The table revealed that 117 (30.7%) of the respondents strongly agreed, 111 (28.6%) agreed, 83 (22.4%) disagreed, and 73 (18.2%) strongly disagreed that collaboration and intelligence sharing among state and non-state actors contribute to controlling the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Kwara State. This indicates that 228 (59.3%) generally agreed that coordinated intelligence and cooperation between agencies, vigilante groups, and community leaders play a crucial role in curbing the spread of illicit weapons.

The identified contributions of state and non-state actors in controlling the proliferation of SALW in Kwara State align with the perspectives of **NP1 & NP3**, who noted that:

“One major step we have taken in Kwara State is improving collaboration with other security agencies to control the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW). A notable

example is Operation Harmony, which operates with a focused mandate to curb crime and to ensure the safety and security of the people of Kwara State."

NM4 & NM5 expressed that:

"Intelligence sharing has become a core part of our operational strategy in controlling the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Kwara State. In 2023, we launched a military exercise known as Operation Still Water III, which was flagged off in parts of Ifelodun Local Government Area."

NC3 & NC5 emphasised that:

"We sought stronger inter-agency collaboration among sister security organisations, including the Nigerian Army, Nigeria Police Force, Nigeria Immigration Service, Department of State Services, National Drug Law Enforcement Agency, and others. This initiative aims to enhance existing synergy in carrying out their constitutional responsibilities and to promote a collective war against trans-border crimes and any form of illicit transfer."

On the issue of enforcement of firearms laws, 113 (29.2%) strongly agreed, 101 (26.6%) agreed, 91 (23.7%) disagreed, and 79 (20.5%) strongly disagreed, showing that 214 (55.8%) of the respondents agreed that strict implementation of firearms regulations helps to reduce the illegal possession and trafficking of weapons in the state. The respondents' perspectives support this, as gathered from in-depth interviews. **NP2 & NP3** highlighted that:

"In Kwara State, we have established a Joint Task Enforcement Team that works with the military, civil defence, and intelligence units to trace and recover illegal firearms. The operation involves cordon and search, community raids, and intelligence-led surveillance to identify and neutralise illegal weapon hubs."

NC4 & NC5 submit that:

The Nigeria Customs Service plays a key role in enforcing firearms laws by intercepting and seizing illegal arms and ammunition at various entry points, including land borders and ports. We work closely with other security agencies such as the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCCSALW) and the Department of State Services (DSS) to combat arms proliferation."

NP5 explained that:

"In 2018, the then Inspector General of Police directed all Commissioners of Police across the 36 states and the FCT to embark on a nationwide disarmament and recovery of prohibited firearms and ammunition. This directive was a critical step in enforcing the Firearms Act and addressing the increasing spread of illegal weapons across the country."

According to **NP4**:

"The Nigeria Police Force enforces firearms laws through public awareness campaigns, targeted mop-up operations, and "stop and search" exercises. We regularly urge those in possession of illegal firearms to surrender them within a set deadline, after which offenders face arrest and prosecution."

With respect to border security and surveillance, 91 (23.9%) strongly agreed, 81 (20.9%) agreed, 107 (27.9%) disagreed, and 105 (27.3%) strongly disagreed, indicating that 172

(44.8%) of the respondents agreed, while 212 (55.2%) disagreed. This suggests that many respondents perceive border control efforts as relatively weak or insufficient in effectively preventing arms smuggling across borders. The results from the qualitative analysis differ from those obtained in the quantitative analysis. As noted by **NC2 & NC4**, who contended that:

“As a Customs officer, our primary responsibility is to ensure effective border security and combat smuggling across the country. We carry out regular surveillance and patrol operations to prevent the illegal movement of prohibited goods such as firearms, hard drugs, counterfeit products, and other contraband that threaten national security and public health.”

NM1 & NM2 emphasised that:

“Previously, we have been working seriously on securing the Kwara State borders in collaboration with other security agencies. However, in recent times, we have further intensified these operations in response to the growing threat of banditry. As part of our collective effort, the Nigerian Army, in close collaboration with the police and the DSS, has enhanced patrols and surveillance along major routes and border points.”

According to **CD3 & CD5**:

“The Civil Defence Corps is involved in securing Kwara State’s borders through inter-agency collaboration. We work closely with other federal security agencies and local vigilance groups in joint operations aimed at curbing banditry and other criminal activities along the border areas.”

In reference to community policing, 111 (28.6%) strongly agreed, 101 (26.0%) agreed, 89 (23.4%) disagreed, and 83 (21.9%) strongly disagreed, revealing that 212 (54.6%) generally agreed that the involvement of local security networks and community vigilance enhances grassroots security and helps identify illegal arms users. This aligns with the perspective of **NP4**, who emphasised that:

“Community policing has made our job easier. People now trust us more and willingly provide information about those in possession of illegal firearms. Most of the arrests we have made recently came through community tips.”

NP1 & NP5 are of the view that:

“The intelligence we get from community members is vital. Through the vigilance groups and local informants, we have uncovered hidden arms in remote areas that would have been impossible to detect on our own.”

According to **CD1 & CD4**:

“Traditional rulers and community heads play a major role. They help us identify strange individuals or movements within their areas. Their cooperation has led to several successful disarmament exercises. The information we receive from locals is shared with sister agencies like the Police Force and DSS for verification and joint operations.”

The figure below shows the contributions of state and non-state actors.

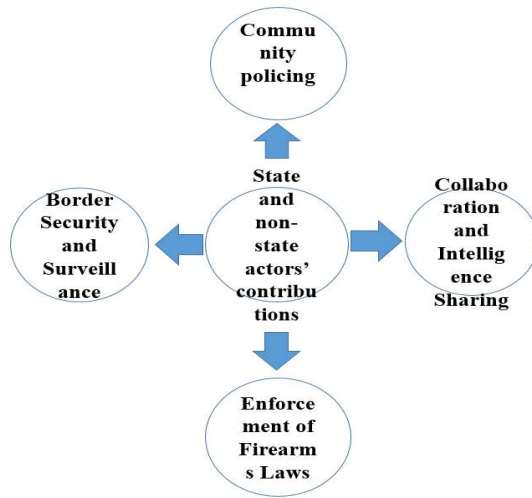


Figure 3: Perception of state and non-state actors' contributions in controlling the proliferation of SALW

Research Question 3: How does the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) contribute to internal security challenges in Kwara State?

Table 5: Respondents' Opinions on How the Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons Contributes to Internal Security Challenges in Kwara State, Nigeria.

Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Threat to Law and Order	123 (32.3%)	111(28.6%)	82 (21.4%)	68 (17.7%)
Empowerment of Criminal Networks	118 (30.7%)	108(28.1%)	88 (22.9%)	70 (18.2%)
Cultism	121 (31.3%)	101(26.0%)	87 (22.9%)	75 (19.8%)
Economic Instability	108 (28.1%)	102(26.6%)	94 (24.5%)	80 (20.8%)

The table reveals that 123 (32.3%) of respondents strongly agreed and 111 (28.6%) agreed that the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) poses a threat to law and order, while 82 (21.4%) disagreed and 68 (17.7%) strongly disagreed. This indicates that a majority (234; 60.9%) of respondents acknowledged that uncontrolled weapons circulation undermines law enforcement and public safety in the state.

The qualitative findings support the quantitative results, as noted by **NC2 & CD1**, who stated that:

“The spread of illegal firearms is directly linked to the breakdown of social order. We often see that minor disputes in communities turn violent because people can easily obtain weapons.”

NP4 highlighted that:

“The easy access to firearms among non-state actors has become a major security concern. It emboldens criminals and bandits to confront security forces and destabilise peaceful communities.”

NM4 & NM5 comment that:

“Power seekers exploit SALW availability to arm supporters or thugs during elections. This turns political competition into violent confrontation, disrupting peace and creating an atmosphere of fear, which undermines lawful democratic processes.”

Similarly, 118 (30.7%) strongly agreed, and 108 (28.1%) agreed that the proliferation of SALW empowers criminal networks, compared to 88 (22.9%) who disagreed and 70 (18.2%) who strongly disagreed. This suggests that 226 (58.8%) of the respondents believe that armed groups and bandits gain operational strength from the easy access to weapons. In support of the majority opinion, **NP1 & NP3** stated that:

“One of the most direct ways that the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons empowers criminal networks is by increasing their firepower and operational capacity. Many of these groups that were once disorganised or small now possess enough weapons to conduct large-scale attacks.”

CD3 argue that:

“The spread of arms fuels criminal economies by enabling illegal activities such as kidnapping, smuggling, and drug trafficking, while profits are reinvested in acquiring more weapons, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of criminal empowerment.”

NC1 & NC3 remarked that:

“The easy circulation of weapons has emboldened criminal groups, as seen in Oke-Ode, where armed bandits displaced residents, turning a once peaceful community into a deserted area.”

According to **CD1 & NP4**:

“Access to small arms has shifted youths’ perception of crime, making it a pathway to quick wealth and power, and fostering a sense of invincibility among gangs, as seen in the Offa bank robbery attack.”

Regarding the rise in youth cultism, 121 (31.3%) strongly agreed, 101 (26.0%) agreed, 87 (22.9%) disagreed, and 75 (19.8%) strongly disagreed. This indicates that a majority (222; 57.3%) of respondents believed that the presence of illegal arms fuels violent youth activities and gang-related crimes. To support the majority perspective, **NP1** affirmed that:

“Cult groups have evolved into organised criminal enterprises that engage in armed robbery, drug trafficking, political thuggery, and kidnapping. The widespread possession of small arms gives them the confidence and firepower to operate with impunity, often overpowering local security measures.”

CD1 & NP5 stated that:

“The display and misuse of arms by cultists undermine public confidence in law enforcement and erode community safety. This situation contributes significantly to internal security challenges, as the proliferation of firearms among non-state actors heightens tension, fear, and instability within society.”

NM5 explained that:

“Among cult groups, small arms serve as symbols of status and power, with gun ownership conferring authority, respect, and fear, and driving competition that reinforces a culture of armed supremacy.”

Regarding economic instability, 108 (28.1%) strongly agreed, 102 (26.6%) agreed, 94 (24.5%) disagreed, and 80 (20.8%) strongly disagreed. This shows that 210 (54.7%) of respondents affirmed that SALW proliferation discourages investment, disrupts livelihoods, and affects the overall economic stability of Kwara State. To further support these findings, **CD4 and CD5** remarked that:

“The constant fear of violence makes farmers afraid to go to their farms, especially in rural areas bordering other states. This disrupts food production, increases prices, and deepens poverty, all of which worsen economic instability.”

NM2 & NM3 highlighted that:

“The cost of maintaining internal security operations has become a burden on both state and federal governments. Funds that could have gone into development projects like roads and education are now spent on security logistics and peacekeeping efforts.”

According to **NP2**:

“The widespread possession of illegal arms discourages investors from coming into affected communities. Once businesses fear attacks or robbery, they either shut down or relocate. This reduces economic activities and affects the internally generated revenue of the state.”

The figure below illustrates the proliferation of SALW and Internal Security Challenges.

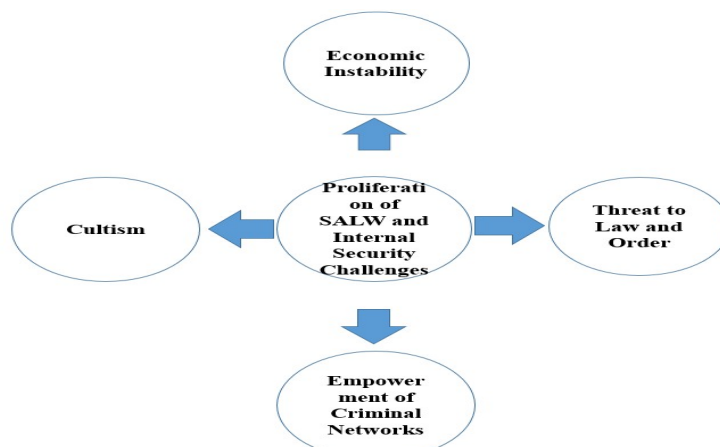


Figure 4: Perception on Proliferation of SALW and Internal Security Challenges in Kwara State

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the extent to which the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) contributes to internal security challenges in Kwara State, Nigeria. It offers critical insights into the underlying sources and driving forces of arms proliferation, the involvement of both state and non-state actors in containment efforts, and the broader implications for public safety and societal stability. Drawing on survey responses from 384 participants, alongside in-depth interviews with selected security personnel, including officers from the Nigerian Police Force, Nigerian Army, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, and the Nigeria Customs Service, the study identifies a range of interconnected themes that collectively influence the state's security landscape.

Findings generated from Research Question One(1), which examined the principal sources and drivers of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation, indicate that multiple interrelated factors contribute to the spread of illicit arms in Kwara State. Survey results showed that a substantial proportion of respondents (57.9%) identified porous borders as a major channel facilitating the influx of illegal weapons into the state. Likewise, more than half of the participants (54.2%) perceived corruption among public officials as a significant contributor to the circulation of illicit arms, suggesting that bribery and collusion involving some security and customs personnel create opportunities for arms smuggling. The findings further revealed that the proliferation of locally manufactured firearms constitutes another important dimension of the problem, with 51.8% of respondents recognising the role of locally produced weapons in sustaining illegal arms availability. Respondents observed that some local blacksmiths, particularly within rural communities, produce unregistered firearms that are utilised for both self-protection and criminal purposes. In addition, socio-economic conditions emerged as notable drivers of SALW proliferation, as poverty (52.6%) and unemployment (52.4%) were widely acknowledged as factors that increase vulnerability to arms trafficking and participation in violent activities, particularly among young people. Taken together, these results indicate that institutional weaknesses, economic deprivation, and governance deficiencies play a significant role in perpetuating the unlawful circulation of weapons within the state. The quantitative findings received considerable support from the qualitative evidence. Interview participants, particularly NP1 and NC1, stressed that inadequate border regulation and limited surveillance infrastructure continue to allow uncontrolled cross-border movement, thereby sustaining illicit arms flows. Supporting this position, Dike (2025) observed that corruption among enforcement personnel undermines effective border governance, while the accessibility of locally fabricated firearms facilitates arms acquisition by criminal and cult-related groups. These perspectives closely correspond with the survey outcomes and reinforce the argument that the proliferation of SALW in Kwara State is driven by a combination of external and internal dynamics, including porous borders, institutional corruption, and local arms production.

Findings relating to Research Question Two (2), which explored the roles of state and non-state actors in mitigating the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), revealed a generally positive assessment of collaborative security efforts. The survey data indicated that a majority of respondents (59.3%) believed that cooperation and intelligence exchange between security agencies and community-based actors had enhanced the effectiveness of security operations. In a similar vein, 55.8% of respondents acknowledged that enforcing firearm regulations is a meaningful strategy for controlling the spread of illicit weapons. Nonetheless, respondents expressed reservations regarding the effectiveness of

existing border security and surveillance mechanisms. A notable proportion (55.2%) disagreed that current border control measures are adequate, suggesting persistent deficiencies in monitoring and regulating cross-border activities. In addition, respondents identified public sensitisation and disarmament initiatives (52.9% agreement) and community policing mechanisms (54.6% agreement) as constructive approaches that contribute to efforts to reduce the circulation of illegal arms. The qualitative findings largely reinforced these survey outcomes. Interview participants, particularly NP3 and NM3, highlighted that collaborative intelligence gathering and joint operations involving the Police, Military, NSCDC, and other security institutions have facilitated the interception and recovery of illicit weapons in several locations. NP5 further explained that national disarmament programmes, coupled with the confiscation of prohibited firearms and ammunition, have promoted the voluntary surrender of weapons. At the same time, the active participation of community leaders has enhanced local early warning and information-sharing mechanisms. Despite these positive developments, certain institutional limitations were also identified. NM4 observed that inter-agency coordination often operates on an ad hoc and reactive basis rather than through a fully institutionalised framework, thereby constraining its long-term effectiveness. Overall, the combined quantitative and qualitative evidence demonstrates that cooperation among security institutions and meaningful community participation are central to efforts to control SALW proliferation. However, the findings also point to the need for stronger institutional coordination, improved policy frameworks, and more robust border management reforms to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Findings from Research Question Three (3), which investigated the contribution of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation to internal security challenges, indicate a broad consensus among respondents on the destabilising effects of widespread firearm availability. The survey results revealed that participants largely associated the spread of weapons with the expansion of criminal influence, rising cult-related activities, political violence, and socio-economic disruption. A clear majority of respondents (61%) agreed that the proliferation of arms weakens law enforcement and undermines public order. In comparison, 59% believed that the availability of weapons enhances the operational strength of criminal networks, enabling them to contest state authority. Furthermore, more than half of the respondents acknowledged the connection between arms proliferation and the escalation of youth militancy and cult-related violence, with over 55% agreeing that easy access to weapons intensifies such activities. These quantitative findings were corroborated by qualitative evidence from interviews. Participants identified as NP1 and NM5 observed that cult groups have become increasingly aggressive and violent due to the relative ease with which firearms can be acquired. Similarly, CD1 highlighted the growing incidence of armed confrontations among rival groups within residential neighbourhoods, noting that such clashes pose significant risks to human life and property. Beyond their immediate security implications, respondents emphasised the broader societal consequences of these developments, noting that armed violence and criminal activity disrupt the social fabric and economic well-being of communities. Collectively, the findings demonstrate that the proliferation of SALW not only intensifies insecurity but also adversely affects social stability and economic activities within the state.

A synthesis of the study's findings reveals that the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) constitutes a significant challenge to internal security in Kwara State. The widespread availability of these weapons enhances the capabilities of non-state armed groups, intensifies violence at the community level, and weakens the legitimacy and authority of

formal security institutions. Although collaborative interventions involving both state and non-state actors have produced encouraging outcomes, particularly through intelligence sharing, joint security initiatives, and community policing mechanisms, several structural obstacles continue to undermine control efforts. Key among these challenges are porous borders, institutional corruption, and inadequate enforcement frameworks, all of which facilitate the persistent movement and circulation of illicit arms. The integration of quantitative findings and qualitative evidence underscores the view that sustainable arms control in Kwara State requires stronger institutional collaboration, more effective, anticipatory intelligence mechanisms, targeted socio-economic interventions, and a firm political commitment to implementing and enforcing firearm regulations.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) and its consequences for internal security in Kwara State, Nigeria. The findings demonstrate that the unchecked circulation of illicit firearms represents a major threat to peace, public security, and sustainable socio-economic development within the state. The study identifies several interconnected drivers of arms proliferation, including porous borders, corruption among public officials, poverty, and unemployment, all of which create enabling conditions for criminality and armed violence. Consequently, illicit weapons have increasingly become tools utilised by cult groups, armed robbers, political thugs, and other violent actors, thereby exacerbating insecurity across communities. Although both state and non-state actors have implemented various measures to control the spread of SALW, considerable obstacles continue to hinder progress. Security institutions such as the Nigerian Police Force, the Nigerian Army, and the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) remain central to response efforts through activities involving law enforcement, intelligence exchange, and community policing programmes. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these interventions is constrained by factors such as inadequate border surveillance, weak inter-agency coordination, and limited operational resources. While public sensitisation campaigns and community-driven security initiatives have contributed to stronger collaboration between citizens and security personnel, the continued availability and movement of illicit weapons continue to place substantial pressure on existing security structures. The study further establishes that the proliferation of SALW has intensified internal security challenges in Kwara State by contributing to the escalation of banditry, kidnapping, cult-related violence, and the politicisation of insecurity. These developments have produced far-reaching consequences, including loss of life, population displacement, property destruction, weakened public trust in law enforcement institutions, livelihood disruption, and a decline in investment confidence. In light of these findings, the study highlights the importance of strengthening institutional frameworks, improving coordination among security agencies, enforcing firearm regulations more effectively, and enhancing border control and surveillance mechanisms. Equally critical is the implementation of youth empowerment and poverty-alleviation initiatives to address the underlying socio-economic conditions that contribute to insecurity. Ultimately, the study argues that lasting peace and enhanced security in Kwara State require a collaborative and sustained approach involving government authorities, security institutions, community leaders, and civil society organisations. Through such coordinated efforts, meaningful progress towards a safer and more stable society can be realised.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the empirical findings generated from this study on the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) and its ramifications for internal security in Kwara State, the following recommendations are presented to support more effective security interventions, strengthen institutional responses, and promote sustainable peace and stability within the state:

- i. The government should accord priority to strengthening border security mechanisms in order to curb the illicit entry of Small Arms and Light Weapons into Kwara State. This may be achieved through increased budgetary allocation, deployment of modern surveillance technologies such as drones and electronic tracking systems, and augmentation of security personnel stationed at border posts. In addition, routine border patrols should be intensified, while structured cross-border intelligence sharing between Nigeria and neighbouring states should be formalised within the framework of the ECOWAS Small Arms Control regime.
- ii. Anti-corruption frameworks within the security sector should be significantly reinforced to enhance the effectiveness of arms control efforts. Both federal and state authorities ought to enforce stringent disciplinary sanctions against security personnel implicated in facilitating arms smuggling or engaging in the unlawful possession of weapons. Furthermore, sustained ethics and integrity training programmes should be institutionalised for officers of agencies such as the Customs Service, the Police, and the Immigration Service to promote accountability, transparency, and professionalism in the discharge of their responsibilities related to arms regulation.
- iii. There is a pressing need for government intervention to regulate the activities of local blacksmiths and artisans engaged in the fabrication of firearms. This can be achieved by establishing a structured licensing and monitoring system under the National Commission on Small Arms and Light Weapons (NATCOM), which would facilitate effective tracking of weapon production and distribution channels. In addition, targeted skills development initiatives and alternative livelihood programmes should be introduced for local gunsmiths to discourage involvement in illicit firearm manufacturing and promote engagement in lawful, sustainable economic activities.
- iv. Security agencies, including the Nigerian Police Force, the Nigerian Army, and the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), should deepen institutional collaboration through structured intelligence sharing mechanisms. Sustained joint operations and the establishment of well-coordinated inter-agency task forces are essential to ensure a unified and effective response to arms-related offences. In addition, the strengthening of community policing frameworks, alongside the active involvement of local vigilante groups, should be prioritised to enhance early warning systems and improve the timely detection and reporting of illicit arms activities at the grassroots level.
- v. Socio-economic conditions, particularly unemployment and poverty, were identified as key drivers of arms proliferation and related criminal activities. In this regard, governments at all tiers should prioritise investment in youth empowerment initiatives, vocational and technical skills acquisition programmes, and sustainable job creation strategies. Such interventions are essential in reducing the vulnerability of

young people to recruitment into cultism, armed robbery, and other forms of violent conduct associated with the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW).

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