

Small Arms Proliferation and Insecurity in North East Nigeria

Stella Nathaniel¹, John Moses Maikomo²

¹Department of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution, Taraba State University, Jalingo, Taraba State, Nigeria

²Department of Political Science and International Relations, Taraba State University, Jalingo, Taraba State, Nigeria

Published October 2026

Abstract

Small arms proliferation remains a major driver of insecurity in North East Nigeria, where insurgency, armed violence, cross-border trafficking and weak security institutions have sustained the circulation and use of illicit weapons. This study examined the socio-economic and political factors facilitating illicit small arms trade and armed violence, and assessed how institutional weaknesses in policing and border security facilitate the proliferation of illicit small arms in the region. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. A sample of 400 respondents was drawn from an estimated adult population of 18,273,000 across Borno, Yobe, Adamawa and Taraba States using Yamane's formula. Data were collected through the Small Arms Proliferation and Insecurity Questionnaire (SAPIQ) and analysed using frequencies, percentages, mean scores, standard deviations and Chi-square statistics. The study was anchored on Security Dilemma Theory. Findings revealed that poverty, unemployment, limited economic opportunities, weak law enforcement, corruption, political instability, porous borders, black markets, ethnic and religious tensions and the activities of insurgent groups significantly facilitate illicit small arms trade and armed violence (grand mean = 3.35, SD = 0.88; $\chi^2 = 3839.139$, $p < 0.001$). The study further found that inadequate funding and training of security agencies, corruption, weak surveillance, poor inter-agency coordination, insufficient manpower, delayed intelligence response, weak prosecution and poor cross-border intelligence sharing significantly facilitate arms proliferation (grand mean = 3.32, SD = 0.90; $\chi^2 = 3630.777$, $p < 0.001$). The study concludes that small arms proliferation in North East Nigeria is sustained by the interaction of socio-economic vulnerability, political conditions and institutional weaknesses. It recommends strengthened border security and intelligence coordination, improved accountability in security institutions, and targeted socio-economic interventions for vulnerable youth and conflict-affected communities.

Keywords: small arms; arms proliferation; insecurity; border security; North East Nigeria

1 Introduction

The proliferation of small arms has become a major global security concern because of its relationship with armed violence, political instability, terrorism and prolonged conflict. The widespread availability of illicit weapons weakens peace and human security by increasing the capacity of non-state armed groups, criminal networks and violent actors to challenge public authority. International initiatives such as the United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons and the Arms Trade Treaty were designed to strengthen arms control, yet illicit circulation remains persistent in many fragile and conflict-affected regions. In Africa, porous borders, weak governance, corruption and inadequate enforcement of arms-control regulations have created conditions in which weapons move across national boundaries and into local conflict systems.

Nigeria illustrates this challenge in particularly severe form. Small arms proliferation has been associated with terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, armed robbery, communal violence and other forms of insecurity (Vincent, 2021). The demand for weapons among criminal groups, militias and insurgents, combined with weak border surveillance and illicit trafficking networks, has intensified insecurity. Adamu et al. (2018) estimated that between one and three million illicit small arms were circulating in Nigeria, although the exact number remains difficult to establish because of the clandestine nature of the trade. The availability of these weapons increases the lethality of disputes and strengthens the operational capacity of violent groups.

The challenge is especially pronounced in North East Nigeria. Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have relied on firearms and other weapons to sustain attacks on civilians, security personnel and public infrastructure. The consequences include deaths, displacement, destruction of property and disruption of education, agriculture, healthcare and other socio-economic activities (Ailemen, 2024). The region's proximity to Chad, Niger and Cameroon, together with porous borders and cross-border trafficking routes, creates additional opportunities for the movement of illicit weapons. These conditions make small arms proliferation both a security problem and a governance problem.

Although military operations, disarmament initiatives and regional security cooperation have been deployed, insecurity and illicit weapons circulation remain persistent. The continuing problem suggests that arms proliferation cannot be explained only by the presence of insurgent groups. It is also connected to poverty, unemployment, weak governance, political instability, corruption, ineffective policing and limited border-control capacity. This study therefore examines the socio-economic and political factors that facilitate illicit small arms trade and armed violence and assesses the institutional weaknesses in policing and border security that sustain the proliferation of illicit small arms in North East Nigeria.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Small arms proliferation has become a persistent security challenge in Nigeria, contributing to insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, armed robbery, farmer-herder conflicts and other forms of violent crime. The uncontrolled circulation of illicit weapons has increased the capacity of violent actors to inflict casualties, displace communities and disrupt economic and social life. In North East Nigeria, these consequences are intensified by the presence of insurgent organisations, porous international borders and established trafficking networks linking Nigeria with neighbouring states.

Despite the existence of the Firearms Act, regional instruments such as the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, military operations and border-security initiatives, illicit arms continue to circulate. This persistence points to deeper socio-economic, political and institutional weaknesses. Poverty, unemployment, lack of economic opportunities, political instability and communal tensions can increase incentives for participation in illicit arms markets, while corruption, weak law enforcement, poor surveillance and inadequate intelligence coordination can reduce the capacity of the state to prevent trafficking and prosecute offenders.

Existing studies have documented the relationship between arms proliferation and insecurity in Nigeria, but the interaction between socio-economic and political drivers and weaknesses in policing and border-security institutions requires closer empirical attention in the North East. Without such evidence, policy responses risk concentrating on seizure and military containment while neglecting the conditions that sustain demand, supply and movement of illicit weapons. This study addresses

this problem by examining the socio-economic and political factors facilitating illicit small arms trade and armed violence and assessing how institutional weaknesses in policing and border security facilitate the proliferation of illicit small arms in North East Nigeria.

1.2 Objectives of the study

The aim of the study is to assess small arms proliferation and insecurity in North East Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- i. Examine the socio-economic and political factors facilitating illicit small arms trade and armed violence in North East Nigeria; and
- ii. Assess how institutional weaknesses in policing and border security facilitate the proliferation of illicit small arms in North East Nigeria.

1.3 Research questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- i. What socio-economic and political factors facilitate illicit small arms trade and armed violence in North East Nigeria?
- ii. How do institutional weaknesses in policing and border security facilitate the proliferation of illicit small arms in North East Nigeria?

1.4 Research hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

H₀1: Socio-economic and political factors do not significantly facilitate illicit small arms trade and armed violence in North East Nigeria.

H₀2: Institutional weaknesses in policing and border security do not significantly facilitate the proliferation of illicit small arms in North East Nigeria.

2 Conceptual review

2.1 Small arms

Small arms are portable firearms specifically designed for use by an individual or a small number of persons for purposes such as self-defence, law enforcement, hunting, military operations and other security-related activities. They generally include revolvers, self-loading pistols, rifles, carbines, assault rifles, submachine guns and light machine guns. Their relatively small size, mobility and ease of operation distinguish them from heavier categories of weapons that require crews, specialised platforms or complex logistical support. Because small arms can be transported, concealed and operated with relative ease, they have become widely used by state security institutions as well as by non-state actors operating in conflict environments.

In legitimate settings, small arms are important instruments for maintaining law and order, protecting territorial integrity and providing security for individuals and communities. Police officers, military personnel and other authorised security agencies depend on such weapons in carrying out their constitutional and operational responsibilities. However, the same characteristics that make small arms useful for legitimate security purposes also make them attractive to criminal

groups, insurgents, militias, armed bandits and other non-state actors. Their portability and concealability facilitate illegal possession, trafficking and movement across communities and national borders, thereby complicating efforts at regulation and control (Gofwan et al., 2019).

The security implications of small arms become particularly serious when they circulate outside formal regulatory frameworks. In conflict-affected societies, uncontrolled access to firearms can transform minor disputes into violent confrontations and increase both the frequency and intensity of armed violence. Small arms can strengthen the operational capacity of criminal and insurgent groups by enabling them to intimidate communities, challenge state security institutions and sustain prolonged violent campaigns. Gofwan et al. (2019) observe that the proliferation and misuse of small arms are closely associated with insecurity, violent crime and threats to national stability, especially where law-enforcement institutions are weak and arms-control mechanisms are ineffective.

Furthermore, the effects of small arms extend beyond immediate physical violence. Their widespread availability can generate fear, displacement, destruction of livelihoods and disruption of economic and social activities. Communities affected by armed violence may experience reduced agricultural production, interruption of education, weakened commercial activities and declining confidence in public institutions. In this regard, small arms should not be understood merely as physical weapons but also as instruments capable of deepening insecurity and prolonging conflict when their possession and circulation are not effectively controlled. Within the context of this study, therefore, small arms refer particularly to portable firearms whose illicit availability and uncontrolled circulation contribute to armed violence and insecurity in North East Nigeria.

2.2 Arms proliferation

Arms proliferation refers to the excessive accumulation, uncontrolled distribution, illicit transfer and widespread circulation of weapons beyond legitimate state, defence or security requirements. It encompasses the production, acquisition, sale, trafficking, diversion and movement of weapons among individuals, criminal networks, armed groups and other unauthorised actors. In the context of small arms and light weapons, proliferation becomes a serious security concern when firearms move outside established regulatory and licensing systems and become readily accessible to actors capable of using them for criminal or violent purposes. Recent studies emphasise that the increasing diffusion of small arms among non-state actors has complicated contemporary security environments by expanding the capacity of criminal and armed groups to sustain violence (Aja, 2024; Amali and Buthelezi, 2025).

Arms proliferation is driven by a combination of supply-side and demand-side factors. On the supply side, poorly controlled borders, illicit trafficking networks, diversion from legitimate stockpiles, weak monitoring systems and ineffective enforcement facilitate the movement of weapons into unauthorised hands. On the demand side, insecurity, poverty, political exclusion, communal tensions, insurgency and the activities of organised criminal groups can increase the desire of individuals and communities to acquire weapons for protection, retaliation or criminal purposes. Amali and Buthelezi (2025) argue that the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Nigeria cannot be explained by porous borders alone, but must also be understood in relation to the socioeconomic and political conditions that generate demand for illicit weapons.

In Nigeria, arms proliferation has become closely associated with terrorism, insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, communal violence and other forms of organised crime. The availability of weapons increases the operational capability of violent non-state actors and can transform local disputes into

more destructive and prolonged confrontations. Aja (2024) observes that the accessibility and usability of small arms have contributed to armed conflict, population displacement, organised crime and terrorism, thereby creating serious challenges for human security and national development. Similarly, Waziri (2023) identifies porous borders, ineffective security measures, corruption and socioeconomic difficulties as important factors sustaining the illicit transfer of small arms and light weapons into and within Nigeria.

The consequences of arms proliferation therefore extend beyond the mere presence of weapons. Uncontrolled circulation can weaken the authority of the state, undermine law enforcement, increase civilian vulnerability, disrupt livelihoods and encourage cycles of retaliatory violence. Recent evidence further suggests that contemporary trafficking networks are becoming increasingly adaptive, making traditional arms-control approaches less effective without stronger intelligence, border management, institutional coordination and evidence-based regulatory responses (Small Arms Survey, 2026). Within the context of this study, arms proliferation therefore refers to the uncontrolled and illicit circulation of small arms and light weapons that enables armed groups, criminal networks and other unauthorised actors to sustain violence and insecurity in North East Nigeria.

2.3 Insecurity

Insecurity refers to a condition in which individuals, communities or states experience actual or perceived threats to life, property, livelihoods and social stability. It encompasses exposure to violence as well as persistent fear arising from terrorism, kidnapping, armed robbery, banditry, communal conflict and other forms of organised criminality. Insecurity therefore extends beyond physical attacks to include psychological anxiety, displacement, disruption of economic activities and declining confidence in institutions responsible for maintaining public safety. Recent assessments emphasise that insecurity becomes particularly severe where state institutions lack the capacity to prevent violence, enforce laws and provide effective protection to citizens (OECD, 2025).

In Nigeria, insecurity has become multidimensional, involving insurgency in the North East, banditry and kidnapping in the North West, farmer–herder violence in parts of the Middle Belt, communal conflicts and other forms of organised criminal activity. The OECD (2025) observes that different forms of organised violence coexist in Nigeria and are reinforced by limitations in the capacity of the security sector to provide effective protection across all parts of the country. Similarly, recent assessments of Nigeria's security institutions identify inadequate personnel, limited equipment, corruption, weak intelligence coordination and difficulties in securing conflict-affected areas as continuing challenges to effective protection (UK Home Office, 2024).

Persistent insecurity consequently undermines socioeconomic development by discouraging investment, disrupting agriculture and commerce, displacing populations and increasing government expenditure on security. It can also weaken public confidence in state institutions and create conditions in which communities increasingly depend on informal security arrangements. Within this study, insecurity therefore refers to the persistent threats to lives, property and social order associated particularly with armed violence and the proliferation of illicit small arms in North East Nigeria.

2.4 Small arms proliferation and insecurity: The nexus

Small arms proliferation and insecurity are closely interconnected because the widespread availability of illicit firearms increases the capacity of violent actors to initiate, sustain and escalate armed violence. In conflict-affected societies, uncontrolled weapons circulation can transform local disagreements, criminal activities and political tensions into more destructive confrontations. UNIDIR (2023) observes that weapons remaining within communities after prolonged conflict can perpetuate crime and violence, undermine post-conflict recovery and weaken longer-term peacebuilding efforts.

In Nigeria, this relationship is particularly evident in the North East, where insurgency, terrorism and communal insecurity have persisted for several years. Small arms in the hands of armed groups enhance their capacity to attack communities and security institutions, maintain territorial influence and prolong violent conflict. Recent security assessments indicate that Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) remain active security threats in the region despite counter-terrorism operations and large-scale defections (ISS, 2024; UNODC, 2025).

The nexus between arms proliferation and insecurity is therefore mutually reinforcing. Existing insecurity can encourage individuals, communities and armed organisations to retain or seek weapons because of perceived threats, while increased weapons availability can further intensify insecurity. Evidence from North East Nigeria shows that weapons possession is influenced by experiences of victimisation, insecurity and involvement with armed or community-security organisations (UNIDIR, 2023).

Consequently, reducing insecurity requires more than confronting armed groups. Effective responses must also address illicit weapons circulation, weak arms-control institutions, structural drivers of violence and the conditions encouraging weapons retention. Within this study, the nexus therefore refers to the reinforcing relationship through which small arms proliferation increases armed violence while persistent insecurity creates conditions that sustain the demand and circulation of illicit weapons.

3 Theoretical framework

3.1 Security dilemma theory

Security Dilemma Theory explains situations in which measures adopted by one actor to increase its security unintentionally generate fear among other actors, prompting countermeasures that leave all parties less secure. The theoretical foundations are commonly associated with Herbert Butterfield's discussion of mutual fear and John Herz's formulation of the security dilemma. The central proposition is that under conditions of uncertainty, actors may interpret defensive preparations by others as potential threats and consequently respond through further mobilisation or armament.

In conflict-affected environments, this process can occur among communities, vigilante organisations, militias, insurgent groups and state security actors. Perceived threats, previous exposure to violence and uncertainty about future attacks may create incentives for weapons possession or continued association with armed security structures. Recent evidence from North East Nigeria shows that exposure to conflict and victimisation, as well as involvement in community security organisations such as the Civilian Joint Task Force, is associated with weapons holding (Kleffmann et al., 2023).

The theory is relevant to North East Nigeria because prolonged insurgency involving Boko Haram factions and ISWAP has created an environment in which armed actors continuously adapt to perceived threats. The continuing resilience and rivalry of armed groups demonstrate how insecurity can reproduce further security responses rather than automatically generating stability (Samuel, 2024).

Security Dilemma Theory therefore provides an appropriate analytical framework for explaining the mutually reinforcing relationship between arms proliferation and insecurity. However, the theory is complemented in this study by socioeconomic, political and institutional factors, since contemporary research shows that illicit arms proliferation in Nigeria is also sustained by supply-and-demand dynamics, weak institutions and trafficking networks (Amali and Buthelezi, 2025).

4 Methodology

4.1 Research design

The study employed a descriptive survey research design. The design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to collect quantitative evidence on the perceptions of respondents regarding the socio-economic, political and institutional factors associated with small arms proliferation and insecurity in North East Nigeria. The survey design also permitted the use of descriptive and inferential statistics to identify dominant patterns and test the study's hypotheses.

4.2 Population and sample size

The target population comprised adults aged 18 years and above in Borno, Yobe, Adamawa and Taraba States who were directly or indirectly affected by insecurity associated with small arms proliferation. Relevant categories included security personnel from the Nigerian Army, Nigeria Police Force and Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, vigilante groups, community leaders, traditional rulers and adult residents with experience of insecurity-related incidents. The estimated population used for the study was 18,273,000. A sample of 400 respondents was selected using Yamane's sample-size formula at a 5 per cent margin of error.

4.3 Instrument and data collection

Data were collected using the Small Arms Proliferation and Insecurity Questionnaire (SAPIQ). The instrument contained demographic items and thirty four-point Likert-scale statements addressing the two substantive objectives of the study: socio-economic and political factors facilitating illicit small arms trade and armed violence, and institutional weaknesses in policing and border security. The questionnaire was administered to respondents across the selected North East states with the assistance of trained research assistants. The 400 valid responses were used for the analysis presented in the study.

4.4 Method of data analysis

The quantitative data were analysed using frequencies, percentages, mean scores and standard deviations to summarise respondents' views. A decision mean of 2.50 was adopted for the four-point scale, such that a mean score of 2.50 and above indicated agreement with an item. Chi-square statistics were used to test the two null hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. The analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

5 Results and discussion

5.1 Research question one

What socio-economic and political factors facilitate illicit small arms trade and armed violence in North East Nigeria?

Table 1. Socio-Economic and Political Factors Facilitating Illicit Small Arms Trade and Armed Violence in North East Nigeria.

S/ N	Socio-economic and political factors	Cat- egory	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)	Mean	SD
1	High levels of poverty in communities contribute to the spread of illicit small arms.	SD D A SA	18 18 152 212	4.5 4.5 38 53	3.40	.77
2	Unemployment among youths encourages involvement in illegal arms trafficking.	SD D A SA	17 44 175 164	4.3 11 43.8 41	3.22	.80
3	Lack of economic opportunities pushes individuals to participate in armed violence.	SD D A SA	19 21 134 226	4.8 5.3 33.5 56.5	3.42	.80
4	Low levels of education make people more vulnerable to recruitment into armed groups.	SD D A SA	25 43 131 201	6.3 10.8 32.8 50.3	3.27	.89
5	Porous borders and cross-border trade make it easier for illicit arms to enter the region.	SD D A SA	31 53 91 225	7.8 13.3 22.8 56.3	3.28	.97
6	The availability of black markets facilitates the circulation of illegal small arms.	SD D A SA	29 36 96 239	7.3 9 24 59.8	3.36	.92
7	Competition over scarce resources (land, water, grazing areas) increases the demand for small arms.	SD D A SA	27 39 83 251	6.8 9.8 20.8 62.8	3.40	.92
8	Weak law enforcement allows illicit arms dealers to operate freely.	SD D A SA	28 26 90 256	7 6.5 22.5 64	3.44	.89
9	Corruption among security officials contributes to the proliferation of illegal weapons.	SD D A SA	35 54 81 230	8.8 13.5 20.3 57.5	3.27	1.00
10	Political instability in the region increases armed violence.	SD D A SA	29 43 92 236	7.25 10.8 23 59	3.34	.94
11	Insufficient border control encourages the smuggling of small arms.	SD D A SA	23 35 122 220	5.8 8.8 30.5 55	3.35	.87
12	Poor governance and weak institutions facilitate the illegal arms trade.	SD D A SA	17 29 119 235	4.3 7.3 29.8 58.8	3.43	.80
13	Ethnic and religious conflicts increase the demand for small arms among communities.	SD D A SA	18 27 116 239	4.5 6.8 29 59.8	3.44	.81
14	Political actors arming local militias contributes to the spread of illegal weapons.	SD D A SA	28 25 112 235	7 6.3 28 58.8	3.39	.89
15	The presence of insurgent groups in the North-East encourages the proliferation of small arms.	SD D A SA	23 54 115 208	5.8 13.5 28.8 52	3.27	.90
Grand mean					3.35	.88

Source: Field survey (2026). SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; A = agree; SA = strongly agree.

The results indicate a strong level of agreement that socio-economic and political conditions facilitate illicit small arms trade and armed violence in North East Nigeria. Poverty recorded 91.0 per cent

agreement, while unemployment among youths recorded 84.8 per cent. Lack of economic opportunities also attracted about 90.0 per cent agreement, showing that economic vulnerability is perceived as an important condition driving participation in illegal arms markets and armed violence. Respondents further associated low educational attainment, porous borders, black markets and competition over scarce resources with the spread and demand for illicit weapons.

Institutional and political conditions were equally prominent. Weak law enforcement, corruption among security officials, political instability, insufficient border control, poor governance, ethnic and religious conflicts, the arming of local militias by political actors and the presence of insurgent groups all recorded mean scores above the 2.50 decision point. The grand mean of 3.35 and standard deviation of 0.88 show a broad consensus that the illicit arms economy is sustained by the interaction of economic deprivation, political instability, governance deficits and conflict conditions rather than by a single factor.

Table 2. Chi-square Test of Socio-Economic and Political Factors Facilitating Illicit Small Arms Trade and Armed Violence.

Option	Observed N	Expected N	Chi-square	df	Asymp. Sig.
Strongly disagree	367	1500.0	3839.139	3	.000
Disagree	547	1500.0			
Agree	1709	1500.0			
Strongly agree	3377	1500.0			

The Chi-square result ($\chi^2 = 3839.139$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$) is statistically significant. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. The result indicates that the distribution of responses differs significantly from an equal distribution across the four response categories and provides statistical support for the conclusion that respondents perceive socio-economic and political factors as important facilitators of illicit small arms trade and armed violence in North East Nigeria.

5.2 Research question two

How do institutional weaknesses in policing and border security facilitate the proliferation of illicit small arms in North East Nigeria?

Table 3. Institutional Weaknesses in Policing and Border Security Facilitating the Proliferation of Illicit Small Arms in North East Nigeria.

S/ N	Item description	Cat- egory	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)	Mean	SD
16	Inadequate funding of security agencies contributes to the proliferation of illicit small arms in North East Nigeria.	SD D A SA	26 30 120 224	6.5 7.5 30 56.0	3.36	.88
17	Poor training of police and border security personnel weakens efforts to control illegal arms trafficking.	SD D A SA	21 40 112 227	5.3 10 28 56.8	3.36	.86
18	Corruption among security personnel facilitates the illegal movement of small arms across borders.	SD D A SA	22 23 128 227	5.5 5.8 32 56.8	3.40	.83
19	Weak law enforcement encourages smugglers to traffic illicit arms into the region.	SD D A SA	24 37 128 211	6 9.3 32 52.8	3.32	.87

S/ N	Item description	Cat- egory	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)	Mean	SD
20	Lack of modern surveillance equipment at border posts contributes to arms smuggling.	SD D A SA	18 27 130 225	4.5 6.8 32.5 56.3	3.41	.80
21	Poor coordination among security agencies allows illegal arms trade to flourish.	SD D A SA	38 68 84 210	9.5 17 21 52.5	3.17	1.02
22	Porous borders in North East Nigeria make it easier for illicit arms to enter the country.	SD D A SA	22 37 92 249	5.5 9.25 23 62.3	3.42	.87
23	Ineffective monitoring of border communities contributes to the spread of illicit small arms.	SD D A SA	31 26 97 246	7.8 6.5 24.3 61.5	3.40	.91
24	Delays in responding to intelligence reports weaken the fight against arms proliferation.	SD D A SA	33 47 112 208	8.3 11.8 28 52	3.24	.96
25	Lack of accountability within security institutions contributes to illegal arms circulation.	SD D A SA	38 50 111 201	9.5 12.5 27.8 50.3	3.19	.99
26	Insufficient manpower among border security agencies reduces effective border control.	SD D A SA	22 38 104 236	5.5 9.5 26 59	3.39	.87
27	Weak legal frameworks and poor prosecution of offenders encourage illicit arms trafficking.	SD D A SA	20 48 113 219	5 12 28.3 54.8	3.33	.87
28	Political interference in security operations undermines efforts to control small arms proliferation.	SD D A SA	29 32 108 231	7.3 8 27 57.8	3.35	.91
29	Poor intelligence sharing between Nigeria and neighboring countries contributes to cross-border arms trafficking.	SD D A SA	23 16 106 255	5.8 4 26.5 63.8	3.48	.82
30	Institutional inefficiency within security agencies contributes significantly to the spread of illicit small arms.	SD D A SA	35 86 99 180	8.8 21.5 24.8 45	3.06	1.01
Grand mean					3.32	.90

Source: Field survey (2026). SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; A = agree; SA = strongly agree.

The findings show that weaknesses in policing and border security are widely perceived to facilitate illicit small arms proliferation. Respondents identified inadequate funding, poor training, corruption among security personnel, weak law enforcement, inadequate surveillance equipment, poor inter-agency coordination and porous borders as major weaknesses. Ineffective monitoring of border communities, delays in responding to intelligence reports, inadequate accountability, insufficient manpower and weak prosecution were also rated above the acceptance threshold.

Particularly important are weaknesses in cross-border intelligence and surveillance. Poor intelligence sharing between Nigeria and neighbouring countries recorded one of the highest mean scores, while porous borders, inadequate surveillance and corruption were also strongly endorsed. The grand mean of 3.32 and standard deviation of 0.90 indicate broad agreement that institutional weaknesses create opportunities for arms traffickers to move weapons through border areas and sustain illicit circulation within the region.

Table 4. Chi-square Test of Institutional Weaknesses in Policing and Border Security.

Option	Observed N	Expected N	Chi-square	df	Asymp. Sig.
Strongly disagree	402	1500.0			

Option	Observed N	Expected N	Chi-square	df	Asymp. Sig.
Disagree	605	1500.0	3630.777	3	.000
Agree	1644	1500.0			
Strongly agree	3349	1500.0			

The Chi-square result ($\chi^2 = 3630.777$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$) is statistically significant. The second null hypothesis is therefore rejected. The result supports the conclusion that institutional weaknesses in policing and border security significantly shape respondents' assessment of the conditions facilitating illicit small arms proliferation in North East Nigeria.

5.3 Discussion of findings

The first objective examined socio-economic and political factors facilitating illicit small arms trade and armed violence. The findings demonstrate that poverty, unemployment, limited economic opportunities, poor education, porous borders, black markets, competition over resources, weak law enforcement, corruption, political instability and communal tensions form an interconnected set of drivers. This result is consistent with Mustapha et al. (2026), who found that small arms proliferation in the BAY States is sustained by a complex interaction of socio-economic, institutional and political factors. It also supports Ahima et al. (2024), who identified political struggle, unemployment, poverty, porous borders, communal crises and land disputes as factors influencing small arms and light weapons proliferation. Similarly, Obademi et al. (2023) linked the widespread availability of SALWs with violent crime, armed conflict and terrorism in Nigeria.

The strong emphasis on economic vulnerability also agrees with Igbini (2020), who identified economic hardship, corruption, youth unemployment and weaknesses in the state's security institutions as important challenges to arms control. Musharafa (2020) likewise associated SALWs proliferation with economic incentives and political interests. Taken together, these findings suggest that effective arms-control policy cannot rely only on seizures and coercive enforcement. It must also reduce the economic and political conditions that make illicit arms markets attractive to traffickers, armed groups and vulnerable populations.

The second objective assessed institutional weaknesses in policing and border security. The findings show that inadequate funding, weak training, corruption, poor law enforcement, limited surveillance technology, poor inter-agency coordination, porous borders, insufficient manpower, weak prosecution and inadequate cross-border intelligence sharing facilitate illicit arms circulation. This finding is consistent with Mustapha et al. (2026), who reported that implementation challenges, weak enforcement and institutional fragmentation reduce the effectiveness of arms-control policies. It also aligns with Umoru et al. (2024), who identified weak state institutions and porous borders as important drivers of arms proliferation, and with Dass and Sulaiman (2023), who emphasised the central role of border porosity.

The result further supports Alaku (2022), Obademi et al. (2023), Rosenje (2020) and Alimba (2017), all of whom highlight weaknesses in security systems, corruption, border leakages and inadequate enforcement as factors sustaining illicit weapons circulation. The implication is that the persistence of small arms proliferation is not simply a consequence of geographical border length; it is also a problem of institutional capacity and accountability. Border-control infrastructure, intelligence coordination, professional conduct, prosecution and regional cooperation must therefore operate together if trafficking networks are to be disrupted.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that small arms proliferation and insecurity in North East Nigeria are produced by the interaction of demand-side and supply-side conditions. Poverty, unemployment, political instability and communal tensions create incentives and demand for arms, while porous borders, corruption, weak surveillance and fragmented security institutions facilitate supply and movement. Sustainable arms control therefore requires an integrated strategy that combines socio-economic prevention with stronger policing, border management, accountability and cross-border intelligence cooperation.

6 Conclusion and recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

The study examined small arms proliferation and insecurity in North East Nigeria based on two specific objectives. The first objective examined the socio-economic and political factors facilitating illicit small arms trade and armed violence. The findings established that poverty, unemployment, limited economic opportunities, low educational attainment, porous borders, black markets, resource competition, weak law enforcement, corruption, political instability, ethnic and religious tensions, political arming of militias and insurgency all contribute to the environment in which illicit weapons circulate. The statistically significant Chi-square result confirmed that respondents strongly perceived these factors as important drivers of the problem.

The second objective assessed how institutional weaknesses in policing and border security facilitate small arms proliferation. The study found that inadequate funding and training, corruption, weak law enforcement, poor surveillance equipment, poor coordination among security agencies, porous borders, delayed intelligence response, inadequate accountability, insufficient manpower, weak prosecution, political interference and poor cross-border intelligence sharing undermine effective control. The study therefore concludes that illicit small arms proliferation in North East Nigeria is sustained by the combined effect of socio-economic vulnerability, political instability and institutional weakness. Effective control requires policies that address both the conditions generating demand for illicit arms and the institutional failures that enable their supply and circulation.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made in line with the two objectives:

- i. The Federal Government and the North East state governments should combine arms-control measures with targeted socio-economic interventions in conflict-affected communities. Youth employment, vocational skills, livelihood support and educational opportunities should be expanded to reduce the economic incentives that make illicit arms trafficking, armed-group recruitment and violent activity attractive to vulnerable populations. Measures addressing communal tensions and competition over scarce resources should also form part of local prevention strategies.
- ii. Security and border-management institutions should be strengthened through modern surveillance technology, improved funding and manpower, professional training, stronger accountability mechanisms and effective prosecution of arms-trafficking offences. Nigeria should also deepen intelligence sharing and coordinated border operations with Chad, Niger and Cameroon under existing regional frameworks, while improving inter-agency coordination among the Police, military, customs, immigration and other relevant security bodies.

References

- [1] Adamu WR, Mat BB, Taya SL (2018). Human security under threat: The proliferation of small arms in Nigeria. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 23(5), ver. 3.
- [2] Ahima SE, Abayam NL, John MM (2024). Implications of small arms and light weapons proliferation on socio-economic development in Wukari local government area of Taraba State. *International Journal of Management, Social Sciences, Peace and Conflict Studies*, 7(1), 517–532.
- [3] Ailemen A (2024). Small arms proliferation worsening Nigeria's insecurity – Report. *BusinessDay* (Nigeria), 26 June 2024.
- [4] Alaku EC (2022). Small arms proliferation and its national security implications in Nigeria, 1985–2016. *Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies*, 5(3), 249–260.
- [5] Alimba CN (2017). Controlling the proliferation of small arms in Nigeria: Emerging issues and challenges. *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(10), 40–51.
- [6] Dass MG, Sulaiman MA (2023). Security challenges and the proliferation of small and light arms in Nigeria: Implication for national development. *Khazanah Hukum*, 5(1), 45–5.
- [7] Gofwan FD, Ishaya J, Ado DM (2019). Small arms and light weapons proliferation and insecurity in Nigeria: Nexus and implication for national stability. *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 24(2), 34–39.
- [8] Igbini MD (2020). Small arms and light weapons proliferation: Implications for security and sustainable development in Nigeria. *International Journal of New Economics and Social Sciences*, 11(1), 1–10.
- [9] Musharafa OR (2020). Effects of small arms and light weapons proliferation on national security in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. *Ilorin Journal of Business and Social Sciences*, 22(1), 71–94.
- [10] Mustapha AS, Bob OU, Stephen AA (2026). Policy deficits and the arms dilemma: Examining small arms proliferation and security threats in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States. *Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 9(1), 9–29.
- [11] Obademi AO, Chagba J, Omale O (2023). Factors influencing arms proliferation on rural development in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria.
- [12] Oche O (2015). The proliferation of small arms and light weapons. *Fog Ventures*, Lagos.
- [13] Okafor FC, Chinonyelum FA (2021). Arms proliferation and the challenges of internal security: The Nigerian experience. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, 4(9), 1–11.
- [14] Osawe CO (2015). Increase wave of violent crime and insecurity: A threat to socio-economic development in Nigeria. *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 20(1), 123–133.
- [15] Rosenje MO (2020). Arms proliferation, security challenge and electoral violence in the 2019 Rivers State governorship election. *African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies*, 13(2), 1–26.
- [16] Umoru U, Ahingir TM, Ahoo TJ (2024). Factors influencing proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths in Benue State Nigeria. *Global Journal of Applied, Management and Social Sciences*, 28(1), 335–346.
- [17] Vincent EE (2021). An empirical assessment of small arms and light weapons proliferation and insecurity in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, 25(2), 1–20.