

ASSESSMENT OF NIGERIA'S IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES (ECOWAS) CONVENTION ON SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS FROM 2011 TO 2024

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Abstract

The principal objective of this study is to assess Nigeria's implementation of the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, with attention to its legal, institutional, and operational dimensions. The study sets out to identify the strengths and the weaknesses in Nigeria's effort to control the proliferation of arms and to align its national practice with the mandates of ECOWAS. The research adopts a qualitative methodology and draws on both primary and secondary sources, among them legal instruments, policy reports, and semi structured interviews with government officials, security personnel, and civil society actors. The findings reveal that, although Nigeria has taken a number of formal steps, including the establishment of the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons, the implementation process remains weak, fragmented, and largely reactive. The principal obstacles identified include outdated legislation, poor coordination among agencies, inadequate funding, porous borders, and a limited culture of public awareness. The study also finds that disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programmes are underdeveloped and are not yet fully integrated into the broader architecture of peace building. Inconsistent political will and limited regional collaboration constitute further obstacles to effective enforcement. The study recommends a multifaceted response that combines legal reform, institutional restructuring, stronger cross border cooperation, strengthened disarmament programming, and enhanced community based initiatives, alongside deeper engagement with the full range of stakeholders. It concludes that the successful domestication and enforcement of the ECOWAS Convention is indispensable to the stability of Nigeria and to the wider peace and security of West Africa.

Keywords: Small arms and light weapons; Arms control; Disarmament; Demobilisation and reintegration; Security policy; Implementation

1. Introduction

Insecurity has remained one of the most persistent challenges confronting West Africa, yet over the last two decades its intensity, its scope, and its complexity have deepened considerably. Across the sub region violence now assumes multiple and overlapping forms, among them terrorism, kidnapping for ransom, banditry, communal conflict, separatist violence, piracy, and other expressions of organised crime. A major factor sustaining these threats is the widespread availability and circulation of Small Arms and Light Weapons, which have increased the lethality of both political and criminal violence and weakened the capacity of many states. Although precise figures are difficult to verify because of underreporting, poor record keeping, and the clandestine nature of trafficking, the available evidence shows that West Africa remains heavily affected by proliferation, with many weapons held beyond effective state control (UNODC, 2020; Small Arms Survey, 2020; GI TOC, 2023). In practical terms the easy availability of these weapons has made local disputes deadlier, prolonged armed conflict, emboldened non state actors, and undermined development across the region.

The growing threat posed by these weapons has long attracted regional and international concern. At the regional level the Economic Community of West African States first responded through the 1998 Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation and Manufacture of Light Weapons in West Africa. That instrument represented an important normative beginning, but its non binding character limited its effect. In recognition of this weakness ECOWAS adopted the Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials in 2006, thereby converting a political commitment into a legally binding regional framework (ECOWAS, 1998; ECOWAS, 2006). The Convention requires member states to establish legal and institutional mechanisms that regulate the manufacture, transfer, possession, marking, tracing, and destruction of these weapons, while also promoting border security, information sharing, and interstate cooperation. Its provisions are consistent with broader international frameworks such as the United Nations Programme of Action and the Arms Trade Treaty, both of which emphasise transparency, accountability, and responsible governance (United Nations, 2001; United Nations, 2013).

Within this wider regional context Nigeria occupies a particularly important position. It is not only the most populous country in Africa and a major political actor in West Africa; it is also among the states most severely affected by armed violence linked to the illicit circulation of these weapons. The country has experienced the Boko Haram insurgency in the North East, banditry and mass abduction in the North West, farmer herder conflict in the North Central zone, separatist violence in the South East, cult related and gang violence in parts of the South South, and criminal violence in major urban centres. In each of these theatres small arms have served as a critical enabler of violence. Earlier studies warned that illicit weapons were deepening insecurity in Nigeria and empowering both insurgent and criminal actors (Hazen and Horner, 2007). More recent reports confirm that the diffusion of firearms continues to fuel rural violence, organised crime, and attacks on civilians, most acutely in the North West and North Central regions (SBM Intelligence, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2020; UNDP, 2023). The relative intensity of this violence across the geopolitical zones is summarised in Figure 1.

Although estimates differ, official and semi official sources consistently suggest that illicit firearms in Nigeria number in the millions, which places the country among the most affected cases in West Africa. What matters more than the exact figure is the pattern that emerges from the literature, namely that weapons circulate through porous borders, are diverted from state stockpiles, are fabricated locally in informal workshops, and are redistributed through criminal and extremist networks (UNODC, 2020; GI TOC, 2023). The Nigerian case therefore illustrates how proliferation both reflects and intensifies deeper governance failure. Weak law enforcement, territorial fragility, corruption, poverty, the exclusion of young people, and unresolved communal tension together create conditions in which weapons become at once tools of survival and instruments of domination. In this sense proliferation in Nigeria should be understood not merely as a security problem but also as a challenge of governance and development.

Nigeria is a state party to the ECOWAS Convention and has taken some steps toward compliance with its regional and international obligations. One of the most notable recent developments was the establishment of the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons in May 2021, which replaced the Presidential Committee on Small Arms and Light Weapons and provided a more permanent institutional framework for the coordination of arms control. The creation of the Centre signalled official recognition that earlier arrangements were too weak, too fragmented, or too temporary to confront the scale of the problem. The literature nevertheless suggests that important deficits remain. The principal domestic instrument, the Firearms Act of 1959 as amended, has been widely criticised as outdated and insufficiently aligned with the contemporary requirements of marking, tracing, record keeping, transfer control, and the regulation of civilian possession that the Convention and related global instruments envisage. This legal gap has been compounded by slow legislative reform, limited institutional capacity, and poor coordination among agencies.

Nigeria's response is further undermined by porous borders, weak surveillance infrastructure, corruption among some security personnel, limited funding, and inadequate intelligence sharing across agencies. The extensive land borders of the country connect it to wider transnational trafficking corridors that run through the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, and, indirectly, post conflict zones such as Libya, where the leakage of arms has had destabilising effects across the continent (UNODC, 2020; GI TOC, 2023). Recent regional studies indicate that insecurity in the Sahel and the expansion of organised criminal markets have increased the mobility of weapons and armed actors across national frontiers, which makes unilateral state responses progressively less effective (UNDP, 2023). For Nigeria the implication is that national implementation of the Convention cannot succeed without effective regional cooperation, the exchange of intelligence, and harmonised enforcement.

Conceptually the study adopts the ECOWAS definition of small arms and light weapons as weapons designed for individual or crew use, including revolvers, self loading pistols, rifles, carbines, sub machine guns, assault rifles, light machine guns, and portable launchers, among others (ECOWAS, 2006). Implementation refers here to the processes through which Nigeria domesticates, operationalises, and

enforces the provisions of the Convention through legislation, institutions, policies, and security practice. Proliferation is understood as the uncontrolled spread and accumulation of weapons through licit and illicit channels, while arms control denotes the legal, administrative, and operational measures that regulate access to and use of such weapons. The institutional framework comprises the network of state agencies and partners responsible for coordinating control, among them the National Centre, the armed forces, the police, customs, immigration, and the relevant ministries. Compliance concerns the extent to which the domestic actions of Nigeria correspond to its obligations under the Convention, and disarmament refers to the recovery, management, and destruction of illicit weapons, together with the associated demobilisation and reintegration of combatants in conflict affected settings.

Despite the growing body of literature on insecurity and proliferation in Nigeria, an important gap remains. Much of the existing scholarship concentrates on the causes and consequences of armed violence, and on terrorism, banditry, insurgency, and communal conflict in particular. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the practical question of implementation, namely how far Nigeria has gone in domesticating and enforcing the Convention, which institutional mechanisms actually function, where the major bottlenecks lie, and why compliance gaps persist. This omission is significant because the effectiveness of a regional arms control regime depends not only on adoption but on domestic enforcement, institutional coherence, and political will. The Nigerian case therefore offers an important opportunity to assess the relationship between regional norm setting and national implementation in a context of chronic insecurity.

The study is situated within African centred peace and security research and responds to both scholarly and policy needs. It examines the extent to which the Nigerian government has implemented the Convention, identifies the role of these weapons in worsening insecurity, analyses the threats generated by their proliferation, and proposes practical measures for strengthening control in Nigeria and in similar multi ethnic states. The specific objectives are to analyse the role of the Nigerian government in implementing the Convention, to examine how proliferation compounds insecurity, to analyse the major threats associated with proliferation, and to propose policy relevant measures for improving arms control in multi ethnic states where inter ethnic conflict threatens national and sub regional security.

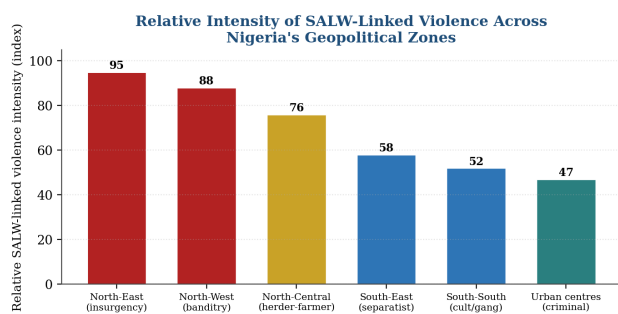


Figure 1: Relative intensity of violence linked to small arms across the geopolitical zones of Nigeria.

Source: Author's synthesis of the cited security literature.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Small Arms and Light Weapons

Small arms and light weapons are widely recognised in peace and security scholarship as a significant source of instability, and especially so in regions that suffer from weak governance, internal conflict, and criminality. The definition advanced by the United Nations (1997) is the one most commonly accepted. Small arms comprise individual weapons such as pistols, rifles, and sub machine guns, while light weapons are larger and are designed for use by a crew of two or three, among them mortars, heavy machine guns, and man portable anti tank systems.

In Nigeria these weapons are deeply embedded in both rural and urban settings, circulating among criminal gangs, insurgent groups, militias, and even ordinary civilians, and so deepening insecurity. Their proliferation has contributed markedly to the escalation of violence in different parts of the country. In the North East the Boko Haram insurgency has driven large inflows of weapons, while in the North West and North Central zones banditry and violent clashes between farmers and herders are increasingly fuelled by easy access to firearms (SBM Intelligence, 2021). As of 2021 it was estimated that more than 6.2 million small arms were in circulation across Nigeria, while security agencies held fewer than 600,000 firearms (PRESCOM, 2021). This stark disparity, illustrated in Figure 2, underscores the magnitude of the challenge.

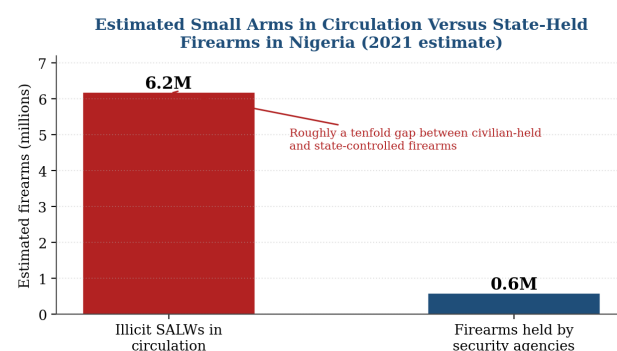


Figure 2: Estimated small arms in circulation compared with firearms held by security agencies in Nigeria.

Source: Author's synthesis of PRESCOM (2021) estimates.

The destructive capacity of these weapons cannot be understated. Florquin and Berman (2005) stress that small arms account for the overwhelming majority of violent deaths in contemporary conflict, and particularly in fragile African states. Their portability, their ease of concealment, and their potential for mass casualty make them especially dangerous in conflict prone regions, as the escalating violence in Nigeria and other West African states makes plain. These weapons sustain insecurity by enabling widespread criminality and by prolonging conflict.

Proliferation refers to the unregulated increase in the circulation, possession, and use of these weapons, often through illicit channels such as black markets, smuggling networks, and war economies. In Nigeria the flow of illicit firearms is compounded by porous borders, weak border control, and the role of the country as both a destination and a transit point. The impact of regional conflict, and especially the civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire, together with the destabilisation that

followed the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, has flooded West Africa with arms. As Onuoha (2011) notes, the extensive land borders that Nigeria shares with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon provide significant opportunity for trafficking and further entrench instability.

The weakness of accountability within the security sector aggravates the problem. Theft from military and police armouries, the use of weapons by non state actors, and the absence of rigorous record keeping together create an environment in which the illicit spread of arms continues unchecked (National Security Strategy, 2019). As a result these weapons have proliferated beyond the control of state authorities and have fed a cycle of violence, criminality, and political instability.

2.2 Implementation of the ECOWAS Convention

The ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, adopted in 2006, represents a critical regional initiative aimed at curbing the proliferation of these weapons across West Africa. Its significance is underscored by the persistent insecurity that their unchecked circulation has produced, including protracted conflict, violent extremism, and organised crime. The Convention requires member states to take proactive steps to regulate the possession, use, and transfer of these weapons, with particular attention to the control of illicit trafficking and the destruction of surplus and illicit stock. The architecture within which these obligations sit, from the 1998 Moratorium to the establishment of the National Centre in 2021, is set out in Figure 3.

Evolution of the Regional and National Arms-Control Architecture



Figure 3: Evolution of the regional and national arms control architecture from 1998 to 2024.

Source: Author's compilation from ECOWAS and Nigerian policy instruments.

Despite the adoption of the Convention, implementation has been slow and uneven across the region. This is especially evident in countries such as Nigeria which, despite being a signatory and a major player within ECOWAS, continues to face significant difficulty in aligning domestic law and security policy with the provisions of the Convention. While some progress has been made in ratification and in the establishment of national frameworks, weak enforcement, political instability, and regional tension have hampered full compliance (PRESCOM, 2020; UNODC, 2020).

One of the most crucial steps in implementation is the creation of legal and institutional frameworks that regulate these weapons. Member states are required to adopt national legislation aligned with the Convention. For Nigeria the core instrument has been the Firearms Act, but the law has been widely criticised as outdated and insufficient to address the contemporary dynamics of proliferation. According to Ayoade (2020), the legal framework remains largely ineffectual, its enforcement undermined by institutional weakness, corruption, and a deficit of political will. In response Nigeria established the National Centre for the Control of

Small Arms and Light Weapons in 2021, which replaced the defunct Presidential Committee. The Centre was intended to streamline the national approach and to enhance coordination with regional and international frameworks such as the Convention, the United Nations Programme of Action, and the Arms Trade Treaty. Even so the Centre faces inadequate funding, limited political support, and fragmented institutional structures that constrain its capacity to enforce control effectively (SBM Intelligence, 2021).

Although member states have committed to regional cooperation, the level of compliance remains uneven. The Convention envisages enhanced cooperation in intelligence sharing, the joint monitoring of arms flows, and coordinated disarmament. As Onuoha (2011) notes, however, many countries, Nigeria among them, continue to struggle with porous borders and weak enforcement that facilitate trafficking across the region. The flow of arms from conflict zones such as Libya, intensified by the aftermath of the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, has compounded the challenge (Giustozzi, 2016). In practice the absence of effective monitoring and reporting means that illicit flows often go undetected, with little accountability for transfers. According to GI TOC (2023), trafficking networks operate with relative impunity across West Africa, exploiting the gaps in regional cooperation and governance.

Weak border security is one of the primary obstacles to effective implementation. The extensive land borders of Nigeria, which stretch over four thousand kilometres and connect the country to several conflict affected regions, provide a significant avenue for smuggling. The porous frontiers between Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon have made it easier for arms to move between countries, and especially during periods of regional instability (National Security Strategy, 2019). The Convention emphasises robust border control, yet weak institutional capacity, insufficient personnel, and corruption complicate the effort. As UNODC (2020) observes, the absence of effective border management systems and the inadequate training of personnel continue to undermine enforcement.

Disarmament, and particularly the removal of illicit arms from circulation, is a key component of the Convention. In Nigeria disarmament has produced mixed results. The 2009 Amnesty Programme, which aimed to disarm militants in the Niger Delta, achieved an initial reduction in violence but did not fully resolve the problem of illicit weapons in the region. Alusala (2019) argues that, while the amnesty produced a temporary reduction in conflict, the underlying drivers of poverty, corruption, and poor governance remained unresolved and allowed illicit arms to re enter circulation. In the North East, where Boko Haram has been a major source of insecurity, disarmament has similarly struggled, since the absence of comprehensive peace building and reintegration has meant that many combatants returned to their communities still armed. According to the International Crisis Group (2020), although some progress has been made, the lack of effective reintegration for former combatants means that many continue to pose a threat.

For the Convention to be fully effective, Berman (2018) and Hazen and Horner (2007) argue that arms control must be integrated into broader governance reform. Effective implementation requires not only stronger legal frameworks and

institutions but also a sustained effort to tackle the root causes of insecurity, among them poverty, political instability, and corruption. ECOWAS must also work more closely with civil society, regional security institutions, and international partners to ensure that the effort is sustainable and responsive to emerging threats. Improving public awareness, enhancing the training of law enforcement, and strengthening border security are therefore essential to the long term implementation of the Convention, as is greater transparency in the recording of transfers and seizures.

2.3 Empirical Review

Onuoha (2011) examines the impact of ECOWAS mechanisms on proliferation in West Africa. Through qualitative research that included interviews with arms control experts and security personnel, he shows that, while ECOWAS has established critical legal frameworks, implementation has been hampered by weak enforcement, and that proliferation in countries such as Nigeria and Mali continues to be aggravated by poor border control, corruption, and fragmented institutions. He recommends that ECOWAS strengthen regional cooperation and enhance the capacity of member states to enforce the law. The study is largely theoretical, however, and does not probe the practical mechanics of trafficking, a gap that could be addressed through more empirical data on arms flows.

Ayoade (2020) focuses on the national frameworks through which Nigeria implements the Convention. Combining qualitative content analysis with interviews, he finds that, although Nigeria has ratified the Convention, its legislation, and the outdated Firearms Act in particular, has not kept pace with the evolving challenge. He recommends updating the Act, increasing investment in enforcement, and tackling corruption within the security agencies. The study overlooks the broader regional influences on national effort, particularly the ways in which the neighbours of Nigeria contribute to the spread of illicit arms. Giustozzi (2016) offers an ethnographic study of border control and trafficking, drawing on interviews with border officials, traffickers, and local communities to show how porous borders facilitate smuggling, especially from Libya. He highlights corruption among officials and inadequate surveillance as major obstacles, though he does not fully address the institutional constraints on the security forces.

Alusala (2019) examines the effectiveness of disarmament in Nigeria, with particular attention to the 2009 Niger Delta Amnesty Programme, and finds that, while the programme temporarily reduced violence, it failed to address the root causes of insurgency and the wide availability of arms, so that many former militants rearmed. He recommends that future efforts be accompanied by long term peace building, including economic opportunity and social reintegration. Berman (2018) explores the role of ECOWAS in promoting regional cooperation and, drawing on data from ECOWAS reports and interviews with policymakers, finds that, although significant strides have been made in establishing frameworks, implementation is hindered by weak cooperation among member states, by political tension, and by concerns over national sovereignty. He recommends stronger coordination and information sharing and a more transparent and harmonised regional policy. Taken together these studies show that, while progress has been made in legal frameworks and institutional

arrangement, gaps persist in enforcement, regional cooperation, and border security, and that future research should integrate quantitative and qualitative evidence to understand how the mechanisms operate at the local level.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in Regional Security Complex Theory, introduced by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever in 2003, which provides a framework for understanding how regional security dynamics are interconnected and how security issues, proliferation among them, are not solely national but affect entire regions. The theory holds that security issues within a region are interconnected and cannot be fully understood by examining individual states in isolation. A security complex emerges when the states of a region share security concerns shaped by both internal and external factors, and these shared concerns generate patterns of cooperation or competition, so that the security of one state is tied to the security of others within a network of interdependence. The interconnection that the theory describes is depicted in Figure 4.

Regional Security Complex: Interdependence of Arms Proliferation Across West Africa

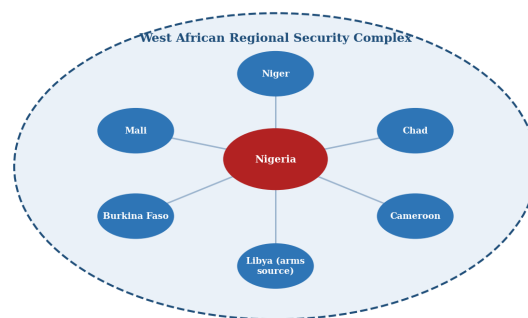


Figure 4: Regional Security Complex showing the interdependence of arms proliferation across West Africa.

Source: Author's adaptation of Buzan and Waever (2003).

Applied to arms control and the Convention, the theory illuminates the interlinked nature of proliferation across West Africa, since trafficking, insurgency, and organised crime carry a transnational dimension that binds Nigeria to Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. The theory assumes that the regional cooperation for which ECOWAS calls is essential to addressing common challenges. It is not without critique. One objection is that the theory tends to generalise the concerns of states within a region and may overlook the internal political and economic factors that also shape security, such as the corruption, instability, and weak institutions that condition the Nigerian case. A further objection is that its emphasis on cooperation can underestimate the role of conflict within regions, since historical rivalry and political tension sometimes frustrate the cooperation the theory anticipates.

Several studies apply the theory to West Africa. Adebajo (2018) uses it to examine how proliferation in the Sahel and West Africa has been fuelled by regional dynamics, arguing that the spread of arms in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria has been aggravated by weak governance and porous borders that affect the entire region, and that effective control requires regional cooperation through ECOWAS. Osumah (2020) uses the theory to explore the relationship between regional security mechanisms and trafficking in the Sahel, finding that trafficking across porous

borders is deeply intertwined with regional insecurity and that the absence of a cohesive regional policy has hampered the effectiveness of control. The theory is therefore highly relevant to the present study, since it explains why arms control in Nigeria cannot be seen in isolation and why the trafficking that originates in conflict zones such as Libya affects the entire Sahel, including Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach and a case study design in order to explore Nigeria's implementation of the ECOWAS Convention. It focuses on individuals who have participated in relevant conferences and discussions concerning the role of Nigeria in arms control, as well as policymakers, opinion leaders, and key stakeholders involved in implementation. The study employs purposive sampling, selecting approximately eleven participants who are relevant to the subject and willing to contribute. This method, also known as judgmental sampling, is chosen because it targets individuals with deep knowledge and experience, which ensures that the data gathered are rich and meaningful (Patton, 2002). To secure diversity and depth, the study includes participants from several sectors, among them senior government officials, technical experts, policy advisers, and representatives of non governmental organisations, so that different viewpoints on the implementation process are captured.

In addition to purposive sampling, the study employs snowball sampling as a complementary strategy, in which initial participants refer further experts who can provide additional insight, and especially those who might otherwise be difficult to reach. Data collection rests primarily on semi structured interviews, supplemented by documentary analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Thematic content analysis is used to interpret the data and to identify the key themes and patterns related to implementation. The sample size is guided by the principle of data saturation, which ensures that enough information is gathered to address the research objectives. This methodological approach is designed to capture the complexity of Nigeria's compliance with regional arms control initiatives.

4. Results and Analysis

The study presents data drawn from interviews with eleven participants, whose anonymity is preserved by the labels participant one through participant eleven, in keeping with ethical guidelines. The analysis is organised around three key themes that emerged from the interviews, and the thematic structure is summarised in Figure 5.

Thematic Structure of Findings on Nigeria's Implementation of the ECOWAS SALW Convention

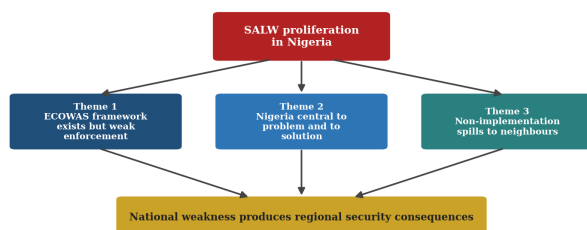


Figure 5: Thematic structure of the findings on Nigeria's implementation of the ECOWAS Convention.

Source: Author's analysis of interview data.

4.1 The Role of ECOWAS in the Fight Against Proliferation

The study explores the role of ECOWAS in combating proliferation, a threat that has become particularly acute in West and Central Africa where these weapons contribute to violence, political instability, and criminality. The participants observed that the weapons are difficult to track because of their widespread illegal ownership in Nigeria, circulating across borders and through ports. Despite the effort of ECOWAS through the 2006 Convention to regulate and control them, the region still faces formidable challenges, among them porous borders, weak governance, and widespread poverty, which together create an environment conducive to organised crime and insurgency. While ECOWAS has made strides, the participants noted, the region remains a hotspot for the illicit arms trade because of the interplay of weak governance, corruption, and insufficient enforcement.

4.2 The Role of the Nigerian Government

The role of the Nigerian government is examined critically, and the analysis reveals that national security has deteriorated over the years because of the high demand for small arms across various sectors, including militias, terror groups, and local criminals. These weapons are trafficked primarily through the porous borders of the country, which complicates the effort to curb their spread. The respondents emphasised that proliferation aggravates ethnic and religious conflict, with disputes over land, boundaries, and resources giving rise to violence, especially in regions such as Plateau State. Despite the membership of Nigeria in ECOWAS and its commitment to the Arms Trade Treaty, domestic enforcement remains weak. This weakness is attributed to outdated law such as the Firearms Act, which does not meet international standards, and to the difficulty of local disarmament programmes such as the amnesty initiative. Although the amnesty in the Niger Delta achieved some success, it remains limited in scope and often fails to address the root causes of conflict. The respondents stressed the need for a comprehensive legislative overhaul to improve control, including better tracking, registration, and the criminalisation of illicit arms activity.

4.3 The Regional Effect of Nigeria's Implementation Record

The approach of Nigeria to implementing the Convention exerts a significant effect on its neighbours. As the largest country in West Africa, its actions, or the absence of action, serve as a benchmark for regional cooperation. When Nigeria delays measures such as updating the Firearms Act or operationalising the National Centre, the result is complacency among neighbouring countries that often look to Nigeria for leadership within ECOWAS. When Nigeria leads, for example through the recent establishment of the National Centre, it encourages other countries to follow and to strengthen their own mechanisms. Conversely the inaction of Nigeria can disrupt regional frameworks and may allow arms to flow from Nigeria into neighbouring conflict zones, which undermines regional disarmament. The participants stressed that the influence of Nigeria is vital to the overall effectiveness of ECOWAS, since its actions directly affect the coordination of border security, the sharing of data, and regional peacekeeping.

5. Discussion of Findings

The findings show that proliferation remains one of the most serious threats to peace, security, and development in Nigeria.

Virtually every geopolitical zone has experienced one form of arms related violence or another, from insurgency and banditry to communal clash, kidnapping, cult violence, and separatist agitation. The study confirms that, although many of these conflicts are rooted in internal problems such as weak state building, competition over scarce resources, ethnic and religious tension, and poor governance, the violence is sustained and intensified by the wide availability of these weapons. This supports the argument of Okafor (2017) that the conflicts of Nigeria are largely socio political in origin, even though the weapons used to prosecute them are often sourced through external and illicit channels.

The return to democratic rule in 1999 did not reduce the challenge; rather, insecurity has expanded in both scale and complexity. In the North East the Boko Haram insurgency and related groups have relied heavily on these weapons, while in the North West and North Central zones banditry and herder farmer violence have also been driven by easy access to firearms. The findings further reveal that porous borders, weak enforcement, and the limited capacity of security institutions have made Nigeria both a destination and a transit route for illicit arms, which aligns with earlier work describing the country as a major hub in regional trafficking networks.

Although Nigeria has signed relevant international and regional instruments, including the Arms Trade Treaty and the ECOWAS Convention, the findings suggest that treaty membership has not translated automatically into effective domestic implementation. The gap between formal commitment and practical enforcement remains wide. Existing law, and the Firearms Act in particular, is outdated and does not adequately reflect current standards on marking, tracing, stockpile management, registration, and computerised record keeping. This weak foundation has created loopholes that traffickers and other criminal actors continue to exploit. The study therefore reinforces the view that the success of arms control depends not simply on signing treaties but on meaningful domestication, institutional reform, and sustained political will.

The findings also show that the responses of Nigeria have often been reactive rather than preventive. Measures such as amnesty and disarmament, especially in the Niger Delta and in the context of counter insurgency, have produced mixed outcomes. While such programmes have at times reduced open violence and encouraged some combatants to surrender weapons, they have not consistently addressed the deeper drivers of insecurity or prevented the re circulation of arms. In some cases, participants noted, individuals surrendered old weapons to benefit from amnesty packages while retaining or acquiring newer ones. This suggests that, without effective monitoring, reintegration, and long term livelihood support, disarmament may offer only temporary relief, and it supports the position that disarmament and amnesty policies must be backed by stronger legal, institutional, and socio economic frameworks if they are to produce lasting results.

A further outcome is the confirmation that the weakness of public security provision has pushed many citizens toward self help arrangements. As confidence in the state declines, communities increasingly rely on vigilante groups, local militias, or privately held weapons for protection. This deepens the security

dilemma, since the arming of one group often prompts others to do the same, and the result is a cycle of fear, mistrust, and escalating violence that not only increases the circulation of weapons but also weakens the rule of law, undermines state authority, and exposes civilians to greater vulnerability. The impact of proliferation thus extends far beyond immediate violence to internal displacement, the destruction of livelihoods, psychological trauma, the violation of human rights, and the erosion of democratic governance, with women, children, and other vulnerable groups bearing a disproportionate share of the burden. In this sense proliferation is not merely a security issue but equally a humanitarian, developmental, and governance problem.

A particularly significant finding is the regional effect of the implementation record of Nigeria. As the largest and most influential state in West Africa, its actions shape the effectiveness of the entire ECOWAS regime. When Nigeria delays reform, fails to operationalise institutions, or implements the Convention inconsistently, it weakens regional momentum and creates opportunity for cross border trafficking. When it demonstrates leadership, it can encourage stronger compliance among its neighbours. This is consistent with the scholarship that treats Nigeria as an anchor state within ECOWAS, and it supports the logic of Regional Security Complex Theory, which holds that the security of states within a region is deeply interconnected. The domestic shortcomings of Nigeria therefore carry consequences not only for its own security but for the wider sub region.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Africa, and in Nigeria in particular, poses a significant threat to national security, peace, and development. The research underscores that, while these weapons are a tool that aggravates conflict, they are not the root cause. In Nigeria their proliferation has intensified existing conflict and fuelled terrorism, insurgency, banditry, and other forms of violence, and despite the effort of the government the country continues to contend with their devastating effects. Governance problems such as ethnic and religious tension, political exclusion, and corruption play a role, yet the immediate enabler is the availability of the weapons themselves, a problem compounded by porous borders and the ease with which arms are smuggled across them. The study calls for a comprehensive approach that moves beyond reactive measures toward durable solutions.

The findings suggest that the role of Nigeria within ECOWAS carries regional as well as national implications. As the most populous and militarily powerful state in West Africa, Nigeria holds a significant position in shaping regional security policy, and its commitment to the Convention is crucial to the success of the regional effort. Inadequate implementation at the national level could undermine that effort and erode trust within ECOWAS, whereas strengthening domestic control would enhance both the security of Nigeria and the stability of the region. On the strength of these findings the study advances the following recommendations.

First, coordination among the security agencies of Nigeria should be improved, particularly in the sharing of intelligence, and technology should be used to enhance control of the land, air, and

sea borders so that the flow of arms can be monitored more effectively. Second, Nigeria must fully domesticate the international and regional treaties it has signed, among them the Convention and the Arms Trade Treaty, adapting them to local content and to its unique security challenges. Third, the government must create a coordinated and sustained national policy to curb the flow of illicit arms, with attention to both preventive and enforcement measures, including action against the criminals and non state actors involved in trafficking. Fourth, internal coordination within the military and the security agencies should be strengthened so that intelligence sharing and operational cooperation improve. Fifth, given the porous borders of the country, urgent steps must be taken to modernise border patrol and to ensure that the agencies are well funded and well equipped to secure the frontiers.

Declarations

The author affirms that this research is free of any conflict of interest and received no external funding. The research was conducted in compliance with established ethical standards, and the anonymity and confidentiality of all interview participants were preserved throughout.

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