

The Role of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) Trafficking in Fueling Insurgency and Banditry in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: The trafficking and proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) constitute a central driver of insurgency and banditry in Nigeria, particularly in the North-East and North-West geopolitical zones. This paper examines how illicit cross-border arms flows, largely originating from conflict theatres in the Sahel, sustain violent non-state actors such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and organised bandit groups. Anchored in Transnational Organised Crime Theory and Resource Mobilisation Theory, the study adopts a qualitative research design based on secondary data drawn from academic literature, policy documents, and institutional reports published between 2024 and 2025. Evidence from United Nations agencies, regional security bodies, and humanitarian organisations is analysed to illuminate the structures of SALW trafficking networks, the mechanisms through which weapons are acquired and circulated, and their effects on conflict escalation, civilian displacement, and national stability. The findings demonstrate that profit-driven transnational criminal networks exploit porous borders, weak governance, and corruption to supply arms, while armed groups leverage these weapons as critical resources for recruitment, territorial control, and operational resilience. The study concludes that SALW trafficking not only prolongs insurgency and banditry but also undermines state authority and exacerbates humanitarian crises across affected regions. It recommends strengthening border management through technology-enabled surveillance, deepening regional cooperation under ECOWAS frameworks, enhancing intelligence sharing, and expanding community-based disarmament and livelihood programmes. Addressing both the supply and demand dimensions of SALW is essential for achieving sustainable peace and security in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS: Small arms and light weapons, insurgency, banditry, Nigeria, transnational organised crime, resource mobilisation

INTRODUCTION

Small arms and light weapons (SALW), defined by the United Nations as portable lethal weapons that can be carried by one or two persons, including firearms, ammunition, and light explosives, pose a profound challenge to state security and human life (United Nations, 2001). Their widespread proliferation undermines the state's monopoly on legitimate violence, transforms localised grievances into protracted conflicts, and erodes community resilience and regional stability (Adebayo & Yusuf, 2019). This proliferation is not merely a policy failure but a fundamental threat to the well-being and future of affected populations, as it facilitates cycles of violence that displace millions and hinder socio-economic development. Globally, SALW account for approximately 45% of all violent deaths, contributing to over 500,000 fatalities annually, predominantly outside formal conflict zones (Small Arms Survey, 2025; United Nations Development Programme, 2024). The issue exacerbates humanitarian crises, with recent reports highlighting how these weapons enable mass killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement in fragile states (United Nations Security Council, 2025). In regions like Nigeria, the unchecked flow of SALW intensifies internal conflicts, challenges governance and perpetuates insecurity (Chuma-Okoro, 2011). Addressing this requires robust international cooperation to curb illicit trade and mitigate its devastating human impact.

Globally, the illicit SALW trade intensified in the post-Cold War era due to surplus stockpiles, contributing to conflicts in regions including the Balkans, Latin America, and Southeast Asia (United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research [UNIDIR], 2008). Efforts to counter this include the United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms (UNPoA), adopted in 2001, which promotes marking, tracing, and stockpile management, and the legally binding Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), effective since 2014. The Fourth Review Conference of the UNPoA in June 2024 reinforced commitments to strengthen national regulations, enhance international cooperation, and integrate gender considerations, with forward-looking recommendations extending implementation to 2030 (United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs [UNODA], 2024; United Nations, 2024). Recent developments include an upgraded MOSAIC assessment tool for legislative and regulatory improvements, and new Security Council resolutions in 2025 aiming to bolster UN coordination on small arms (UNODA, 2025; Security Council Report, 2025). For the ATT, Vanuatu's accession in December 2025 marks progress, alongside 2024 reports emphasising transparency in arms transfers and a review of EU export controls continuing into 2025 (The Arms Trade Treaty Secretariat, 2025; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI],

2025). Successes, such as Central American disarmament programmes, demonstrate the value of comprehensive approaches combining import controls and community initiatives (Control Arms, 2024).

In Africa, SALW proliferation hinders peace and development, prompting initiatives like the Bamako Declaration of 2000, which committed states to national and regional measures against illicit trafficking (Saferworld, 2010). The African Union (AU) launched the "Silencing the Guns" initiative under Agenda 2063, originally targeting 2020 but extended to 2030, focusing on root causes such as governance deficits and structural conflicts (African Union, 2025). Recent updates include the 2024 and 2025 Africa Amnesty Months, which encouraged voluntary surrender of illicit weapons, resulting in collections like 144 AK-47s destroyed in one event, and side events emphasising lessons for broader disarmament (UNREC, 2024; UNODA, 2025). The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) transformed its 1998 moratorium into the binding 2006 Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, requiring national commissions for control (ECOWAS, 2006). Progress in 2024–2025 includes annual coordination meetings, strengthened partnerships with UNODA and the EU, and updates to weapons and ammunition management policies across 14 African states (ECOWAS Commission, 2024; UNIDIR, 2025). Despite challenges like capacity gaps, successes such as Kenya's disposal of nearly 40,000 firearms highlight effective amnesties and seizures (Ayissi & Sall, 2005).

Nigeria exemplifies these challenges, with extensive porous borders facilitating smuggling from Sahel conflict zones, including post-2011 Libyan stockpiles (Nwankwo & Musa, 2021; Small Arms Survey, 2024). Domestic factors—corruption, weak enforcement, unemployment, and poverty—fuel demand, sustaining violent non-state actors (Chuma-Okoro, 2011). In 2025, SALW proliferation has escalated violence, with over 2,266 deaths in the first half alone, surpassing 2024 figures, and incidents like a January confrontation in Borno State killing six soldiers and 34 insurgents (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025; Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2025). Reports attribute 65% of mass killings and displacements to these weapons, exacerbating banditry, insurgency, and crimes like herder-farmer clashes (International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Management, 2025; International Policy Briefs, 2025). Sahel links intensify the issue, with violent extremist organisations trafficking arms amid rising attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, threatening spillover into Nigeria (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025; Institute for Applied Research, 2025; Security Council Report, 2025). Illicit economies, including drug and human smuggling, further sustain these networks, underscoring the need for enhanced border security (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2025; Deutsche Welle, 2025).

This paper contends that SALW trafficking, facilitated by cross-border criminal networks, prolongs violence by arming non-state actors, compromising border security, and displacing communities. Employing a qualitative design drawing on secondary sources including academic literature, reports from UNODC, IOM, Small Arms Survey, and recent case studies from 2024–2025—the analysis is framed by Transnational Organized Crime Theory (explaining profit-driven, cross-border smuggling networks) and Resource Mobilization Theory (elucidating how arms enable group organisation and escalation) (Williams, 2001; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). This approach allows for a nuanced examination of empirical data, such as UN Security Council overviews on global SALW developments and specific Nigerian incidents, to highlight interconnections between illicit flows and local conflicts (United Nations Security Council, 2025). By integrating these theories, the paper critiques limitations like overlooking ideological factors while proposing pathways for policy interventions grounded in recent initiatives.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two theories were used to underpin this discourse

Transnational Organised Crime Theory

Transnational Organized Crime Theory, initially conceptualised by Phil Williams in his seminal 1996 edited volume *The United Nations and Transnational Organized Crime*, posits that organised crime operates through flexible, profit-maximising networks that transcend national boundaries, exploiting globalisation, institutional weaknesses, and corruption to facilitate the illicit trade in commodities such as small arms and light weapons (SALW) (Williams, 1996). The theory's core tenets emphasise the non-hierarchical, adaptive nature of these networks, which prioritise economic incentives over ideological motivations, leveraging regional instabilities to establish resilient supply chains. Key variables include globalisation (enabling rapid communication and logistics), weak governance (such as porous borders and underfunded enforcement), and corruption (facilitating bribery and diversion). Williams argues that these elements create a symbiotic relationship between criminal actors and conflict zones, where illicit flows not only generate revenue but also perpetuate instability by arming non-state groups. This framework shifts focus from traditional state-centric security paradigms to the transnational dynamics of crime as a security threat in its own right, highlighting how profit-driven adaptation allows networks to evade detection and evolve in response to interventions.

In the Nigerian context, Transnational Organised Crime Theory elucidates the variables driving SALW trafficking across the country's porous borders with Sahel neighbours like Niger, Chad, and Mali, where weak institutions and corruption enable seamless cross-border flows from post-Libyan civil war stockpiles (Nwankwo & Musa, 2021). For instance, globalisation manifests through digital coordination among smugglers, while enforcement gaps exemplified by under-resourced patrols along the 4,000 km border allow networks to conceal weapons in legitimate trade or via corrupt officials, as detailed in a 2024 INTERPOL report on recycled Libyan arms (INTERPOL, 2024). Recent empirical evidence from UNODC's Operation KAFO IV in December 2024 underscores

this, with seizures exposing profit-oriented links between Sahel-based traffickers and Nigerian insurgents, amplifying regional insecurity amid rising trans-border crimes like arms smuggling (UNODC, 2024a). The December 2025 Risk Bulletin further illustrates network adaptability, as armed groups rerouted supplies following crackdowns, directly fuelling banditry and insurgency by sustaining economic predation in ungoverned spaces (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2025). Thus, the theory relates these variables to Nigeria's system by framing SALW as a commodified resource in a broader illicit economy, exacerbating national vulnerabilities and hindering state monopoly on force.

Resource Mobilisation Theory

Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), pioneered by John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald in their foundational 1977 article "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," asserts that the viability and escalation of social movements or armed groups depend less on underlying grievances and more on the strategic acquisition and deployment of tangible resources, including financial, material, and human assets (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Central tenets include the emphasis on opportunity structures such as access to external funding or networks, which enable mobilisation, the role of elite sponsorship in resource aggregation, and the transformation of latent discontent into organised action through efficient resource management. Unlike purely grievance-oriented models, RMT highlights how groups like insurgencies succeed by converting resources into operational capacity, such as recruitment drives or tactical innovations, thereby shifting power dynamics against state authorities. Charles Tilly's complementary work in *From Mobilisation to Revolution* (1978) extends this by underscoring how resource control in contentious politics determines conflict trajectories, positioning mobilisation as a rational, resource-dependent process rather than an emotional outburst.

Applied to Nigeria, RMT reveals how trafficked SALW serve as a critical mobilising resource, enabling insurgent groups like Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the North-East to evolve from grievance-driven raids into sustained territorial campaigns, while bandits in the North-West exploit arms for economic sustainment amid poverty and governance failures (Onuoha, 2024). In the North-East, a 2025 analysis correlates enhanced weaponry access often Sahel-sourced with ISWAP's tactical advancements, including drone attacks that bolster recruitment and operational resilience against military operations (Soufan Centre, 2025). Similarly, North-West banditry, evolving from localised cattle rustling to organised kidnapping syndicates by August 2025, relies on ransom-funded rearmament to maintain fluid hierarchies and control over ungoverned forest enclaves, as documented in ACAPS's November 2025 report estimating nearly 30,000 active bandits (ACAPS, 2025). Case studies of youth mobilisation in these conflicts illustrate RMT's variables: external arms inflows act as opportunity structures, amplifying internal capacities and perpetuating violence despite state countermeasures, such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (Onuoha, 2024). By relating resource access to Nigeria's socio-economic disparities, the theory explains how SALW transform structural grievances—like unemployment—into entrenched insecurity, underscoring the need for interventions targeting supply chains.

THEORY INTEGRATION

The synergy between Transnational Organized Crime Theory and Resource Mobilization Theory provides a comprehensive lens for analysing SALW trafficking's role in Nigeria's conflicts: the former delineates the profit-driven mechanisms ("how") of cross-border arms delivery through adaptive networks exploiting globalisation and corruption, while the latter elucidates the strategic utilisation ("why") of these resources to mobilise and sustain insurgent and bandit groups amid opportunity structures (Williams, 1996; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Together, they frame SALW as a dual nexus, both a global commodity sustaining illicit economies and a local catalyst enabling power shifts in ungoverned spaces, as evidenced by 2024–2025 escalations where Sahel-sourced weapons funded both trafficking profits and operational expansions (UNODC, 2024a; ACAPS, 2025). This integration highlights complementarities, such as how transnational networks supply the material resources RMT deems essential for mobilisation, yet critiques persist regarding their relative neglect of ideological elements (e.g., Boko Haram's jihadism) or cultural drivers in banditry (Onuoha, 2024). Nonetheless, the combined framework offers a robust analytical foundation for policy formulation, emphasising interventions that disrupt supply while addressing domestic resource vulnerabilities to mitigate SALW-fueled instability in Nigeria.

BACKGROUND ON SALW TRAFFICKING IN NIGERIA

Nigeria's SALW trafficking crisis is deeply entrenched in historical legacies, such as the post-colonial arms stockpiles from civil conflicts, and contemporary regional turmoil, including the fallout from the 2011 Libyan civil war that flooded the Sahel with surplus weapons. Primary sources encompass recycled stockpiles from Libya, estimated to have supplied over 20 million firearms continent-wide, Eastern European manufacturers diverted through black markets, and domestic leaks from national armouries due to poor stockpile management (Small Arms Survey, 2025). A January 2025 report by the International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Management corroborates this, estimating that illegal arms circulation has surged by 25% since 2023, with over 70% originating from Sahel conflicts, where instability in Mali and Niger exacerbates diversion (International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Management, 2025). This influx not only arms non-state actors but also perpetuates a vicious cycle of violence, as evidenced by the April 2025 Springer analysis linking supply-demand imbalances to heightened national insecurity (Managing

the proliferation of small arms and light weapons for national security in Nigeria, 2025). Furthermore, the July 2025 study in the Journal of Social Sciences and Management underscores how these sources intersect with local manufacturing of improvised explosives, amplifying threats to civilian populations and state authority (Impact of proliferation of small arms and light weapons on Nigeria's security, 2025). Addressing this requires tracing historical inflows to curb future escalations.

Trafficking routes in Nigeria are diverse and resilient, traversing desert caravans from Niger and Mali, exploiting ancient trade paths now repurposed for illicit goods, maritime paths via the Gulf of Guinea through Benin, and overland convoys across the Chad border, often concealed in humanitarian aid convoys or commercial vehicles (United Nations Security Council, 2025). Methods typically involve sophisticated concealment techniques, such as hiding weapons in vehicle compartments, bribing customs officials, or integrating SALW with parallel smuggling of drugs and humans, as highlighted in the Global Initiative's December 2025 Risk Bulletin (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2025). Enabling factors include Nigeria's porous borders spanning approximately 4,000 km with four neighbours, weak customs enforcement characterised by outdated technology, endemic corruption within security agencies, and Sahel instability further intensified by military coups in Mali (2020–2021) and Niger (2023). UNODC's 2024 Sahel report documents these drug-arms synergies, noting that cocaine seizures valued at over \$10 million in the region directly fund weapon acquisitions, with traffickers adapting to interdictions by diversifying routes amid rising instability (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024). An October 2025 Fairview Africa analysis estimates over 10,000 unmonitored routes, underscoring how these vulnerabilities sustain a transnational illicit economy (Tackling the Proliferation of Illegal Arms in Nigeria, 2025). Enhanced surveillance could disrupt this nexus.

Key hubs for SALW trafficking include Maiduguri, serving as the North-East gateway due to its proximity to Chad and Cameroon, and Zamfara, the North-West epicentre where bandit enclaves thrive in forested border areas. These locations facilitate storage and distribution, often intertwined with local markets for cattle rustling and kidnapping (ACAPS, 2025). A timeline of recent seizures illustrates enforcement efforts: In August 2025, Operation SAFE HAVEN (OPSH) in Plateau State handed over 220 recovered small arms and light weapons comprising AK-47 rifles, locally made pistols, and ammunition to the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCCSALW), marking a significant crackdown on criminal elements (The Guardian Nigeria, 2025). Earlier, UNODC's Operation KAFO V, conducted in January 2025 across West and Central Africa, including Nigeria, resulted in 75 arrests and the seizure of over 400 small arms, thousands of ammunition rounds, and links to terrorist financing, disrupting networks tied to Sahel smugglers (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2025). These operations, while impactful, reveal ongoing challenges, as a November 2025 Security Council Report notes persistent diversions despite such interventions (Security Council Report, 2025). Continued joint actions are essential for sustained progress.

Route	Origin	Destination Hubs	Primary Methods	Recent Seizures (2024–2025)
Sahel Desert	Libya/Mali	Maiduguri/Zamfara	Caravans/Bribery	KAFO V: 400+ weapons
Maritime	Gulf of Guinea	Benin Border	Ship Concealment	INTERPOL ops: 500 firearms
Overland	Chad/Cameroon	Borno/Yobe	Vehicle Hides	UNODC: 300 AK-47s

Despite ECOWAS's 2024 Annual Coordination Meeting on Small Arms and Light Weapons held in November 2024 in Abuja, which focused on combating improvised explosive devices and regulating artisanal production, progress remains limited by implementation gaps across member states (ECOWAS Commission, 2024). Nigeria's National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCCSALW) has been pivotal, leading regional discussions in October 2024 and advocating for stronger ties in September 2025 during a UNODA partnership forum, emphasising intelligence sharing and capacity building (NCCSALW, 2024; United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, 2025). The November 2025 ECOWAS meeting further called for enhanced enforcement of the 2006 Convention, yet challenges persist, including funding shortages and political instability, as noted in UNIDIR's October 2025 Weapons and Ammunition Management Insight (United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2025). Nigeria's June 2024 enactment of the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons Act represents a milestone, empowering NCCSALW as the lead agency, but regional synergies are crucial for efficacy (Nigeria Seeks Regional Action Against Illicit Arms, IED Threats, 2024). Bolstering these ties could yield transformative results.

THE ROLE OF SALW TRAFFICKING IN FUELING INSURGENCY

In Nigeria's North-East, the trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALW) has profoundly transformed ideological insurgencies into sophisticated military campaigns, aligning with Resource Mobilisation Theory's focus on weaponry as a key enabler of organisation and sustainment (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). This influx empowers groups to shift from opportunistic violence to strategic operations, exploiting arms availability to recruit fighters and maintain momentum against state forces. A pertinent case study involves Boko Haram and its splinter faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which dominates the Lake

Chad Basin. ISWAP's resurgence in 2025 has been marked by intensified drone strikes and ambushes, as documented in a July 2025 ISPI report that attributes their resilience to sustained arms inflows from regional networks (Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 2025). Similarly, a September 2025 analysis from the Institute for Security Studies highlights Boko Haram's (JAS faction) renewed activities, complicating the security landscape and underscoring how SALW perpetuate factional rivalries and civilian threats (Institute for Security Studies, 2025).

The mechanisms through which trafficked SALW fuel insurgency are multifaceted, enabling recruitment by arming defectors and disaffected youth, facilitating deadly attacks via improvised explosive devices (IEDs) derived from smuggled explosives, and supporting territorial control in remote areas. This process resonates with Resource Mobilisation Theory, which posits that access to such resources converts grievances into structured resistance (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). For instance, in November 2025, Boko Haram executed an ambush on troops in Borno State, resulting in eight fatalities, a strike made possible by advanced weaponry obtained through illicit channels (ACLED, 2025). These arms not only enhance operational capabilities but also bolster morale and logistical endurance, allowing groups to withstand prolonged engagements. A July 2025 report from The New Humanitarian further illustrates how ISWAP leverages SALW to impose taxation and governance in controlled zones, thereby sustaining their campaigns amid economic incentives (The New Humanitarian, 2025). Such mechanisms perpetuate cycles of violence, displacing communities and straining humanitarian responses.

Empirical evidence of SALW's role in escalation abounds, with incidents like the 2025 Chibok-style kidnappings and raids on internally displaced persons (IDP) camps highlighting intensified operations. Seizures provide concrete proof: a February 2025 United Nations sanctions report details ISWAP's extensive arms caches sourced from Sahel routes, while a May 2025 Soufan Centre brief connects tactical evolutions such as coordinated assaults to increased SALW access (The Soufan Centre, 2025; United Nations Security Council, 2025). Cross-border dynamics exacerbate this, with transnational networks from Chad supplying approximately 60% of arms, as per UNODC findings, profiting from weak governance and porous frontiers (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024). These networks, often intertwined with organised crime, exploit regional instabilities like coups in neighbouring states, amplifying the flow of weapons and undermining bilateral security efforts (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025).

Subsections of analysis reveal specific dimensions: in tactics, 2025 innovations like drone usage and ambushes have marked a shift towards asymmetric warfare, enhancing insurgents' evasion capabilities (Crisis Group, 2024). Escalation is evident, with attacks rising by 40% in 2025 according to Crisis Group assessments, driven by SALW proliferation that emboldens factions amid factional infighting. Counter-insurgency challenges persist, as state forces remain outgunned, per November 2025 evaluations, with under-resourced military operations struggling against well-armed adversaries (Security Council Report, 2025). These elements collectively illustrate how SALW trafficking not only sustains but also intensifies insurgency, necessitating integrated regional strategies to disrupt supply chains and bolster local resilience.

CASE STUDY: BANDIT GROUPS IN KATSINA AND SOKOTO

In Nigeria's North-West, banditry has evolved into a pervasive threat, particularly in states like Katsina and Sokoto, where armed groups conduct mass kidnappings and raids that exacerbate humanitarian crises. These bandits, often operating in loosely organised syndicates, target communities for ransom, cattle rustling, and territorial dominance, leading to widespread displacements. For instance, a July 2025 IOM flash report documented 538 individuals displaced in Sokoto due to armed raids, while October 2025 attacks in neighbouring Zamfara forced hundreds more from their homes, highlighting the intensifying violence (International Organisation for Migration, 2025a). Recent incidents include a September 2025 assault in Katsina and Sokoto that abducted 40 Muslim worshippers, and an August 2025 military rescue of 76 kidnap victims in Katsina, underscoring the groups' boldness amid security gaps (This Day Live, 2025; France 24, 2025). This case study illustrates how banditry, distinct from ideological insurgency, thrives on economic opportunism, displacing over 1.2 million people across the region as per IOM's July 2025 Round 17 assessment (International Organisation for Migration, 2025b).

The mechanisms underpinning banditry reveal how SALW trafficking enables cattle rustling, abductions, and the creation of retaliation cycles in ungoverned spaces, aligning with Resource Mobilisation Theory's emphasis on resource access for sustaining operations (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Trafficked arms provide bandits with the firepower to conduct large-scale kidnappings, generating millions in annual ransoms that fund further rearmament and recruitment. In Katsina and Sokoto, this has fostered self-perpetuating violence, where initial raids provoke community arming or vigilante responses, escalating conflicts. A 2025 analysis notes that bandits exploit these dynamics to control resource-rich areas, imposing taxes and restricting mobility (ACAPS, 2025). Such mechanisms not only prolong insecurity but also deepen humanitarian needs, as displaced populations face repeated threats in makeshift camps, further straining local resources and governance structures.

Empirical evidence of banditry's impact is stark, with IOM's July 2025 Round 17 report recording 1.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the North-West and North-Central zones, predominantly driven by bandit attacks (International Organisation for Migration, 2025b). ACAPS's November 2025 thematic report notes sustained high displacement levels since 2022, fluctuating with conflict intensity and affecting over 670,000 people in states like Zamfara, Katsina, and Sokoto (ACAPS, 2025). A June 2025 study

highlights severe gender impacts, with women and girls facing heightened risks of sexual violence, forced labour, and health crises during displacements caused by banditry (ResearchGate, 2025). These findings underscore the humanitarian toll, including food insecurity and limited access to services, as banditry disrupts agriculture and trade in affected communities.

Cross-border links amplify banditry, with arms supplied via Niger-Mali routes aligning with Transnational Organised Crime Theory's focus on profit-driven networks exploiting weak borders (Williams, 1996). UNIDIR's November 2025 report on victimisation ties exposure to bandit arms access, revealing how Sahel-sourced weapons sustain attacks and victimisation patterns in Nigeria's North-West (United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2025). Socio-economic drivers, such as poverty, amplify arms demand among marginalised youth, while the evolution from herder-farmer clashes to organised syndicates in 2024–2025 reflects surging criminal enterprises. Arms further sustain forest bases as ungoverned spaces, enabling bandits to evade capture and launch operations, necessitating regional interventions to sever these illicit flows.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALW) remains a critical driver of prolonged insurgency and banditry in Nigeria, as evidenced by the escalation of violence and mass displacements recorded between 2024 and 2025. Viewed through the complementary lenses of Transnational Organised Crime Theory and Resource Mobilisation Theory, this phenomenon reveals a symbiotic relationship between profit-driven cross-border networks that supply illicit arms and the strategic utilisation of these weapons by non-state actors to sustain and expand their operations. While the theories effectively explain the mechanisms of supply and mobilisation, they somewhat overlook ideological motivations in jihadist groups and cultural dimensions in banditry, areas that merit further scholarly attention. Ultimately, unchecked SALW proliferation not only undermines border security and state authority but also perpetuates humanitarian crises, displacing millions and stifling socio-economic progress. Addressing this challenge demands concerted national and regional action to disrupt trafficking networks and reduce demand through inclusive development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To mitigate the impact of SALW trafficking and its role in fuelling insecurity, the following measures are proposed:

Strengthen Border Security: Introduce advanced technologies such as AI-driven surveillance systems and unmanned aerial monitoring, alongside expanded joint patrols with neighbouring countries under ECOWAS frameworks, building on the achievements of operations like KAFO.

Combat Transnational Networks: Intensify intelligence sharing through Interpol and regional platforms, with targeted disruptions of Sahel-based smuggling routes to dismantle profit-oriented criminal syndicates.

Promote Community-Level Interventions: Expand NCCSALW-led voluntary disarmament initiatives, coupled with sustainable economic programmes for at-risk youth, including skills training and livelihood support to reduce recruitment into armed groups.

Advance Policy and Legal Frameworks: Accelerate full implementation of the Arms Trade Treaty and reinforce compliance with the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, supported by enhanced national legislation and regional coordination mechanisms.

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