

The Impact of Illegal Small Arms and Light Weapons on Conflict in The Niger Delta of Nigeria

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Abstract

Small arms and light weapons (SALWs) constitute one of the most persistent security challenges in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, sustaining decades of armed violence through their excessive availability and illegal circulation. This study examines the historical evolution, drivers, and impact of illegal SALW proliferation on the intensity and duration of armed conflict in the Niger Delta, from the pre-colonial period to the contemporary petroleum era. The study adopts a historical research design, drawing on documentary evidence from intergovernmental reports and published scholarship, and analyses it through historical and content analysis within a human security theoretical framework. It was found that the illegal proliferation of SALWs, which is traceable to the transatlantic slave trade, colonial conquest, Cold War-era arms transfers, and post-independence petroleum politics, has sustained militarisation and normalised armed violence in the region, with far-reaching social, cultural, economic, and political consequences for Niger Delta communities. It concludes that the persistence of armed conflict in the Niger Delta cannot be fully understood without accounting for the historical depth and continuing supply of illegal SALWs. The study recommends stringent and coordinated arms control measures, strengthened border and maritime surveillance, and community-based disarmament and reintegration programmes as means to curb the conflict in the Niger Delta.

Keywords: small arms, light weapons, illegal proliferation, armed conflict, Niger Delta, human security

Introduction

The illegal proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) constitute a worldwide, increasingly complex, and multifaceted problem that affects people in every region of the world. By virtue of their easy availability, low cost, and manageability, SALWs have become the weapon of choice in armed conflicts and criminal violence globally. In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the availability and illegal proliferation of large quantities of SALWs have sustained and prolonged armed violence and conflict, thereby contributing significantly to the escalation of hostilities and the entrenchment of a militarised political culture. SALWs remain the primary tools of armed conflict in the region and have caused injuries, displacement, and death among thousands of civilians, hindering the human and economic development of Niger Delta communities (Nganga, 2008, pp. 1–3).

SALWs are conventional weapons, not weapons of mass destruction; however, although individually small, their cumulative and indiscriminate use produces devastating and widespread consequences in conflicts around the globe. At the Millennium Summit of 2000, United Nations member states recognised that the poor are especially vulnerable to the effects of SALWs and agreed that poverty alleviation and economic growth are undermined by their illegal proliferation and misuse, a problem that remains very acute in developing countries (Small Arms Survey, 2002; Muggah, 2003, p. 126). More recent evidence corroborates this, as Nigeria's own National Small Arms and Light Weapons Survey estimated that the country hosts several million illegally held firearms, with the great majority being outside state control. It is this scale of illicit circulation that continues to fuel violence across its regions (Small Arms Survey, 2021).

SALWs have become a serious security challenge in the Niger Delta specifically because of their excessive availability, spread, and indiscriminate use throughout the region's communities. The South-South geopolitical zone is vulnerable to SALW-related violence in multiple contexts, as their availability, spread, and misuse have affected human welfare directly and indirectly, harming human development and pushing displaced civilians toward private and informal security arrangements during and after periods of armed conflict. SALW availability and proliferation rank among the leading causes of social conflict in the Niger Delta, causing both fatal and non-fatal injury (Muggah, 2008, p. 127).

The proliferation of SALWs in many regions of the world is, in part, a legacy of the Cold War. The rise in arms production and the dynamics of its proliferation are directly connected to events that unfolded during that period. The United Nations Disarmament

Commission observed that one factor bearing on the availability, circulation, and accumulation of SALWs in conflict areas was their early supply by Cold War rivals competing for influence (United Nations Disarmament Commission [UNDC], 1999, pp. 9–10). Globalisation subsequently reinforced this trend, providing arms dealers with easier networks for procurement and cross-border transportation of weapons into weak states with porous borders and poor control systems (United Nations Panel of Government Experts on Small Arms [UNPGESA], 2001, p. 4). In the Niger Delta, this trend is closely tied to the weak and fragile character of the Nigerian state and its recurring failure to deliver effective governance; SALWs have consequently been used to forcibly displace civilians, obstruct development activity, and hinder humanitarian, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping efforts.

At the end of an armed conflict, SALWs remain within the community or region, where they may fuel further violence, since crisis can resume unpredictably. Weapons left behind are frequently redirected toward non-conflict criminal violence, including suicide, homicide, and armed robbery, and have at times become the principal instruments of terrorist violence against civilian populations (Homer-Dixon, 1999, pp. 29–31). SALWs also contribute to armed conflict, organised crime, displacement, and terrorism, undermining peace, reconciliation, safety, stability, and sustainable development (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, p. 1); countries such as Yemen, Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, Nepal, Pakistan, Somalia, Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, and Guinea are examples of the devastating consequences that follow the illegal proliferation of arms (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, p. 25).

Contemporary scholarship confirms that the problem in Nigeria has not abated as insurgent groups in the North-East, including Boko Haram and its offshoot the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), continue their operations substantially through illicitly trafficked SALWs routed through the unchecked Sahel and Lake Chad Basin (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). In the South-South and Gulf of Guinea maritime space, the same weapons ecosystem has encouraged the resurgence of piracy and oil-theft-related violence, while in the Niger Delta itself, the historically rooted supply channels that date back to the transatlantic slave trade, the palm oil trade, and the Cold War continue to influence present patterns of arms availability (Nyiayaana, 2021). A recent study by U. A. Aja was of the view that SALW proliferation was the principal driver of organised crime, terrorism, and human security decline, which requires urgent and coordinated policy attention (Aja, 2023).

The Niger Delta has experienced armed conflict of varying intensity for over six decades, notwithstanding successive government interventions, including the 2009 Presidential Amnesty Programme. A recurring feature of this conflict is the continuous availability of illegal SALWs, which appear to outlast every phase of demobilisation and disarmament. Existing studies have documented the social, economic, and political

consequences of this proliferation, yet comparatively few have asked, in a historically grounded and theoretically explicit way, why the supply of illegal SALWs into the Niger Delta has proved so difficult to interrupt across radically different political eras: the slave trade, colonial conquest, the Cold War, and the petroleum age. This study is therefore necessary to establish the historical continuities in SALW supply that sustain the Niger Delta conflict and to explain, through an explicit theoretical lens, how this proliferation translates into the region's persistent human security deficit.

Literature Review

Scholarship on SALWs' proliferation in Africa developed along two broad, complementary strands. The supply-side literature examines the manufacture, transfer, and trafficking of weapons and the policy interventions aimed at regulating production, stockpiles, and border control (Boutwell & Klare, 2000; Muggah & Sang, 2013). The demand-side literature, by contrast, emphasises the socio-political motivations for weapons acquisition, including state fragility, criminality, and the search for protection amid weak governance (Alimba, 2008). Rupesinghe and Anderlini (1998) observed early on that automatic weapons had become so freely available in parts of Africa and Asia that they could be hired on an hourly basis, underscoring how deeply SALWs had penetrated informal economies even before the turn of the century.

Within the specifically Nigerian and Niger Delta context, earlier studies traced the origins of SALW proliferation to European mercantile and colonial activity. Edward, Nwosu, and Sanni (2005) argued that European traders introduced firearms into West Africa to advance imperial ambitions and to suppress African resistance to conquest and colonial rule. Okoro (2005) similarly situated the Niger Delta's arms history within a longer arc of exploitation, beginning with the slave trade, continuing through the palm oil trade of the nineteenth century, and culminating in the petroleum economy that emerged after Nigeria's independence. Chuma-Okoro (2017) captured how firearms introduced for colonial suppression and, later, ceremonial display were gradually repurposed as instruments of criminality once the underlying colonial order collapsed.

More recent works have substantially deepened this picture, as Nyiayaana (2021), drawing on archival trade records, demonstrated that the transatlantic slave trade, the nineteenth-century palm oil trade, and the post-independence crude oil economy formed three interconnected and historically continuous channels through which SALWs entered the Niger Delta and argued that supply-side dynamics, driven by the political economy of successive export trades, have been at least as important as domestic demand in explaining the region's arms saturation. This finding directly qualifies the earlier literature's tendency to treat Niger Delta militancy of the 2000s as a novel, demand-driven phenomenon,

showing instead that the region's arms economy has deep historical roots predating the discovery of oil.

On the causes and drivers of contemporary proliferation, Yacubu (2005) linked illegal arms circulation to profiteering in the local weapons trade, while Boutwell and Klare (2000) identified the low cost, durability, and portability of SALWs as the core to their appeal for non-state armed actors. Jekada (2005) and James (2002) both emphasised governance failure, corruption, and the state's inability to guarantee public security as structural drivers of illegal possession. These arguments have been backed by Nigeria's National Small Arms and Light Weapons Survey, which found several million firearms in civilian hands nationally, the overwhelming majority held illegally, and linked their proliferation to poverty, unemployment, and weak institutional control (Small Arms Survey, 2021).

A growing body of post-2018 scholarship has extended this literature to contemporary security threats beyond the Niger Delta proper, situating the region's arms economy within the wider West African and Gulf of Guinea security complex. Aja (2023) characterised SALW proliferation as a driver of organised crime, insurgency, and human security decline across Nigeria, while the UNODC (2023) noted how firearms trafficking routes linking the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, and the Gulf of Guinea encouraged both Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency in the northeast and maritime piracy and oil-theft violence in the Niger Delta and its coastal waters. These studies collectively suggest that Niger Delta arms proliferation can no longer be studied in isolation from regional and transnational trafficking networks.

On the consequences of proliferation, Cook and Ludwig's (2002) work on the economic and developmental costs of firearm violence remains influential, arguing that the visible costs of armed violence, injury, and death substantially understate its true social burden once households' adjustments in spending and lifestyle to avoid victimisation are taken into account. Chinedu and Chukwuemeka (2018) linked the disruption caused by SALW-fuelled conflict to environmental degradation in the oil-bearing communities of the Niger Delta, while Edet (2019) documented the erosion of cultural heritage, displacement, and psychological trauma associated with prolonged armed conflict in the region.

Notwithstanding these contributions, the existing literature exhibits three notable gaps that this study addresses. First, much of the literature specific to the Niger Delta predates 2018 and has not been updated in light of more recent developments in regional insecurity, including the intensification of Gulf of Guinea piracy and the expansion of trans-Saharan trafficking networks. Second, the literature rarely integrates the historical supply-side account of SALW proliferation with a systematic analysis of its multidimensional social, economic, and political consequences within a single explanatory framework. Third, few studies make explicit use of a theoretical framework capable of

linking arms proliferation to human welfare outcomes; this study addresses that gap by adopting human security theory, discussed in the following section.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on human security theory, first systematically articulated in the United Nations Development Programme's 1994 Human Development Report, which redefined security away from a narrow, state-centred concern with military threats toward a people-centred concern with freedom from want and freedom from fear. The framework identifies seven interlocking dimensions of security relevant to individuals and communities, and they are economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1994).

Human security theory is well suited to this study because the impact of illegal SALW proliferation on the Niger Delta is not confined to combat casualties alone; it cuts across precisely the dimensions the framework identifies. Personal security is directly threatened by the routine use of SALWs in armed violence, criminality, and gender-based violence; community security is undermined as the framework's dispersal of communities erodes social cohesion, language, and cultural transmission; economic security is eroded through the disruption of fishing, farming, and trading livelihoods and the diversion of household spending toward protection; environmental security is compromised by the interaction of armed conflict with oil-related ecological damage; and political security is weakened as SALW-armed non-state actors challenge the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force and deepen popular grievance against the federal government (UNDP, 1994; Alimba, 2008).

Applying this framework, the study treats the illegal proliferation of SALWs as the main causal mechanism through which the Niger Delta's human security deficit across social, cultural, economic, and political domains is produced and sustained and uses the framework's dimensions to organise the analysis of impact that will be discussed in this work. presented in Section 8.

Methodology

The study adopts a historical research design, appropriate for a subject whose contemporary manifestations can only be adequately understood by tracing their development across successive historical periods. The design relies on documentary sources, comprising secondary historical scholarship, government and intergovernmental reports, including those of the Centre for Population and Environmental Development (CPED), the Presidential Committee on Small Arms and Light Weapons (PRESCOM), and the Small Arms Survey's National Small Arms and Light Weapons Survey for Nigeria, as well as peer-reviewed journal articles retrieved from academic databases.

Evidence was analysed using historical analysis to establish chronological change and continuity in the sources and drivers of SALW proliferation and content analysis to identify recurring thematic patterns across the social, economic, and political consequences reported in the secondary literature. This combination allows the study to move beyond simple description toward an explanatory account of how historically accumulated arms supplies produce contemporary human security outcomes. As a study based entirely on secondary sources, the analysis is necessarily limited by the coverage and reliability of the underlying literature and by the general scarcity of disaggregated, community-level data on SALW possession in the Niger Delta; this limitation is addressed, in part, by triangulating older historical scholarship against more recent survey-based and documentary evidence.

Historical Evolution of Illegal SALWs Proliferation in the Niger Delta

Small arms are generally understood as weapons designed for use by an individual, including revolvers, self-loading pistols, rifles, carbines, assault rifles, and light machine guns. Light weapons, by contrast, are designed for use by two or more persons operating as a crew and include heavy machine guns, hand-held and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, recoilless rifles, and mortars of calibres below 100mm. This remains the most widely accepted definition of SALWs as established by the 1997 Report of the United Nations Panel of Government Experts on Small Arms (UNPGESA, 1997, p. 13; Stemmet, 2001, p. 3; Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, p. 1). Put differently, SALWs may be understood as any weapon used by an individual or small group to injure or kill, ranging from rudimentary implements to modern conventional firearms. Their proliferation and use, from small arms to heavier ordnance, have historically been implicated in warfare and conflict worldwide, with profound consequences for the world's poorest regions, the Niger Delta among them.

The entry of SALWs into the Niger Delta cannot be adequately understood without reference to its historical roots in the transatlantic slave trade. European traders were the ones who introduced firearms into the region from as early as the fifteenth century, but the volume of firearms imports expanded dramatically in the second half of the eighteenth century, directly in step with the growth of the slave trade; British export records indicated that between 1796 and 1805 alone, more than 1.6 million guns were imported into West Africa from England, with the Bonny trading area of the Niger Delta receiving a disproportionately large share relative to other West African slaving ports (Nyiaaana, 2021, citing Inikori, 1977). This pattern reinforces what historians have termed the 'slave-gun cycle', in which firearms were acquired to capture slaves, whose sale in turn financed the acquisition of further firearms (Nyiaaana, 2021).

SALWs and other weapons were subsequently deployed by European powers to advance their imperial ambitions and to suppress African resistance to conquest and colonisation (Edward, Nwosu, & Sanni, 2005, pp. 14–18). British agents used gunboat diplomacy to compel Niger Delta chiefs to enter treaties and established the West African Frontier Force (WAFF), which executed the British-Aro War of 1901–1902. The Royal Niger Company, later reconstituted as the United African Company and backed by the British government, used SALWs to suppress dissenting communities across the region; these weapons subsequently passed into African hands, where they were used both in traditional hunting and, over time, turned into ceremonial and symbolic objects that were displayed at funerals, festivals, and customary ceremonies before ultimately becoming instruments of criminality in the twentieth century (Okoro, 2005, p. 38; Chuma-Okoro, 2017, p. 39).

The introduction of SALWs by European merchants also ignited rivalries, wars, and intensified political ambition among the Niger Delta's inhabitants (Akpan, 2011, p. 115). During the colonial and immediate post-colonial period, the region absorbed additional weapons stockpiles supplied to opposing sides during the Cold War, funnelled through clandestine networks of arms brokers, private military companies, and local smugglers, which exacerbated existing conflicts and enabled new ones across the continent (Abdel-Fatau Musa, 2002, p. 9).

The collapse of the Soviet Union released a substantial flow of arms from Central and Eastern Europe into weakly regulated markets, becoming a further source of SALW penetration into the Niger Delta as illegal arms dealers, private security entrepreneurs, and ethnic militia groups absorbed weapons that were no longer accounted for by state armies (Alli, 2006, p. 14). Globalisation further accelerated the transnational movement of illegal arms, changing a domestic law-and-order problem into a national and international security threat and creating increased demand for SALWs in non-war settings, including sectarian, ethnic, religious, and chieftaincy disputes, as well as election-related political violence, in which politicians have periodically armed thugs to secure electoral advantage (Abdel-Fatau Musa, 2002, p. 23).

Additional sources of SALW penetration into the region include diverted supplies from earlier conflicts, weapons stolen from state security services, leakages from government armouries facilitated by corrupt personnel, arms captured during combat, weapons diverted from national and ECOWAS/ECOMOG peacekeeping stocks, purchases on open and black markets, and local craft production inherited within families and communities (Araba, 2007, p. 111). With the discovery and exploitation of petroleum in commercial quantities in the Niger Delta from 1958 and the escalation of resource-related grievances from the 1990s onwards, these historical channels of supply converged with contemporary militancy, producing the scale of illegal SALW proliferation that

characterised the region during the 2000s Niger Delta insurgency and that persists, in modified form, today (Nyiayaana, 2021).

Drivers of Illegal SALW Proliferation in the Niger Delta

Illegal proliferation denotes the unregulated, rapidly increasing availability of SALWs within a given community, region, or country, driven by the ease with which individuals can obtain them through unlawful channels. As a worldwide and progressively complex phenomenon, SALW proliferation in the Niger Delta is influenced by the interaction of several socio-economic and political dynamics that have made SALWs the weapon of choice in the region's armed conflicts and a central driver of its culture of militarisation (Chuma-Okoro, 2017; Araba, 2007; Alimba, 2008).

Non-state actors, including warlords, armed rebels, bandits, insurgents, and criminal groups, favour SALWs precisely because they are not expensive, simple to use, durable, portable, easily concealed, and lethal (Alimba, 2008, p. 120). Once introduced into an area, SALWs tend to remain there for years, altering the tide of local conflicts and enabling minor disputes to escalate rapidly into fatal violence; the Niger Delta's experience of machine guns, rifles, grenades, and pistols killing and displacing civilians across its communities exemplifies this pattern (Alimba, 2008; Small Arms Survey, 1999).

A general lack of transparency in Nigeria's arms trade policy, which the state treats as classified, complicates independent verification and oversight of weapons in circulation. The scale of the problem was made vivid by the volume of weapons surrendered by ex-Niger Delta militants under the Presidential Amnesty Programme launched in 2009, which offered insight into the extent of SALW possession and proliferation across the region's communities (Federal Government of Nigeria, Amnesty Programme, 2011, p. 14). Nigeria's broader conflict-proneness, arising from its pluralistic composition and entrenched patterns of armed violence, further facilitates the diversion of weapons into illicit circulation through theft, leakage, and resale to ethnic militias, including Niger Delta militant groups (Small Arms Survey, 2021).

Rising crime rates in the Niger Delta both fuel and are fuelled by demand for SALWs, as communities respond to the excesses of militant groups by acquiring weapons for personal and family protection, while local weapons fabrication has become a profitable trade for those engaged in it (Yacubu, 2005, p. 89). Government demand for SALWs to counter political insurgency and suppress militant opposition has likewise contributed to their high demand and illegal proliferation; Boutwell and Klare noted that SALWs are widely available, inexpensive, durable, and easy to transport and smuggle, which are characteristics that make them the weapon of choice in most modern armed conflicts (Boutwell & Klare, 2000, pp. 6–7). Their accumulation does not by itself create armed

conflict, but it aggravates existing social, ethnic, political, and environmental tensions, transforming them more readily into violent confrontation.

Governance failure compounds these dynamics, as the inability of federal, state, and local government institutions to guarantee the protection of lives, property, and public goods has entrenched poverty and unemployment, pushing many Niger Delta youths toward criminal activities, including piracy, armed robbery, militancy, and kidnapping for economic gain, and sustaining demand for SALWs across the region's communities (James, 2002, p. 89). The Nigerian state's inability to provide public security has visibly weakened its control over SALWs within its jurisdiction, placing its monopoly on the legitimate use of force within reach of criminal elements, militants, and warring communities, and sustaining the region's armed conflicts. Corruption in high places compounds this security paradox as the low wages of security personnel, underemployment, weak judicial systems, and growing inequality compel young men and women toward arms as a means of survival, while poverty, inequality, and social marginalisation further expand the proliferation of illegal arms, drug trafficking, and corruption in Niger Delta society (James, 2002, pp. 45–50).

This governance-failure explanation has been substantially reinforced by recent empirical work. Agba and Enang (2021) found youth unemployment and restiveness in the Niger Delta to be directly and measurably linked, with idle, economically excluded youth constituting the readiest recruitment pool for armed groups seeking to acquire and deploy SALWs. Adeyemi and Olorunfemi (2020) similarly traced the region's persistent militancy to unemployment-driven grievance, while Umanah, Udom, and Badey (2023), applying the youth-bulge and frustration-aggression perspectives, showed that the combination of a large youth population, rising unemployment, and poor socio-economic conditions continues to sustain a high risk of militancy resurgence in the Niger Delta, independent of the 2009 Amnesty Programme's formal disarmament gains. This post-2018 evidence indicates that the drivers identified in the earlier literature (James, 2002; Yacubu, 2005) have not weakened over time but have persisted, and in some respects intensified, into the present decade.

Effects of Illegal SALWs Proliferation on Armed Conflict in the Niger Delta

In line with the human security framework adopted in this work, illegal SALW proliferation and the armed conflict it sustains have led to consequences across the social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions of human security in the Niger Delta. These consequences are examined in turn below, with attention to why and how SALW availability translates into each specific outcome, rather than as a mere catalogue of effects.

Social and Cultural Impact

The direct effects of SALW proliferation and armed conflict on human development in the Niger Delta include fatal and non-fatal injury, long-term disability, and lost productivity. These direct costs, however, do not capture the full social burden of gun violence, such as the indirect costs of protection and avoidance, including household spending diverted toward personal security rather than productive investment, which constitutes a further tax on the standard of living of Niger Delta communities (Cook & Ludwig, 2002, p. 62).

Armed conflict, which is fuelled by SALWs, has caused serious damage to historical sites, monuments, shrines, and the graves of community heroes, eroding tangible heritage that would otherwise be transmitted to future generations, while forced displacement has severed community ties to land and heritage, undermining cultural identity (Edet, 2019, pp. 23–26). The dispersal of communities under conflict has accelerated the erosion of indigenous languages and cultural expression, while surviving communities have been compelled to abandon customary ceremonies, festivals, and rituals for safety reasons; the breakdown of social structures and traditional value systems this produces disrupts the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and leaves lasting psychological trauma that further hampers communities' capacity to sustain cultural practice (Edet, 2019, p. 67).

SALW-driven displacement has also produced diaspora communities that adapt to new environments, generating both loss and hybridisation of cultural practice, while conflict-related censorship and insecurity have constrained artistic and creative expression in the region; post-conflict cultural revitalisation typically requires deliberate preservation programmes, trauma healing, and community-led reconciliation (Nyiayaana, 2021, referencing Muggah, 2022, p. 52). At the household and community level, large-scale displacement has produced refugee and internally displaced persons' camps in which access to housing, food, and basic resources is precarious, while the loss of life and associated trauma extend well beyond the active phase of conflict to affect long-term mental health and community cohesion. Family and community cohesion is correspondingly weakened, and prolonged conflict is further associated with malnutrition, damage to communication infrastructure, water shortages, and inadequate healthcare, effects disproportionately borne by children, youth, girls, and the elderly.

This human cost is corroborated by a 2022 case-series study at a tertiary health facility in the Niger Delta which documented a continuous caseload of gunshot injuries arising from armed robbery, insurgency, banditry, and kidnapping and called for combined action on crime prevention and socio-economic deprivation to reduce the burden on the region's already weakened health system (Odatuwa-Omagbemi *et al.*, 2022). This clinical finding gives direct, present-day confirmation of the personal-security deficit that human security theory identifies as a central consequence of SALW proliferation.

Armed conflict disrupts educational systems and school calendars, hindering access to quality education as school buildings are damaged or repurposed for military use, undermining the objectives of Nigeria's National Policy on Education and contributing to poor student performance (Edet, 2019, p. 45). Continuous conflict is also associated with heightened gender-based violence, including sexual violence, which disproportionately affects women and girls and exacerbates existing gender inequality. Children face particular vulnerability as they are being forced into armed groups through kidnapping, conscription, and coercive recruitment. Child soldiering attributes this vulnerability to a combination of socio-political marginalisation, economic poverty, and the access to food, status, and power that weapons appear to confer in otherwise unpredictable environments (Sesay & Ismail, 2003, p. 57).

Economic Impact

The availability, spread, and misuse of SALWs in the Niger Delta have had significant and wide-ranging economic effects on local livelihoods. Conflict has disrupted oil production, which happens to be the mainstay of the Nigerian economy, while also eroding the local population's own primary economic occupations, including fishing, farming, and trading, which depend on undisturbed access to the natural environment. Environmental degradation associated with conflict, including oil spillage, compounds this damage: petroleum hydrocarbon releases, whether accidental or the result of sabotage, cause harm to crops, fisheries, livestock, and human populations alike (Chinedu & Chukwuemeka, 2018, p. 88).

The scale of this economic disruption is illustrated by Nigeria's Upstream Petroleum Regulatory Commission, which reported losses of approximately \$3.2 billion to crude oil theft between January 2021 and February 2022 alone. This was a period in which the country was, at times, losing over 300,000 barrels of crude oil per day to theft, vandalism, and related criminal activity, much of it enabled by armed groups equipped with illegally proliferated weapons securing theft and bunkering operations (as reported in *The Guardian*, 2022). This confirms, with recent data, the same dynamic described in the earlier literature, in which SALW-armed non-state actors convert control over oil infrastructure into a direct and continuing drain on national and regional economic security. SALW proliferation and the illicit arms trade also perpetuate corruption, as armed groups draw on resources generated through illicit trafficking to continue their operations (United Nations, 2001), and armed conflict has hindered broader development efforts, producing infrastructural deficiencies and constrained economic opportunity for the region's youth. The psychological toll of high insecurity, including trauma and chronic stress, further reduces the indigenous population's capacity to contribute productively to economic growth, while the resulting dependency of unemployed youth on family support networks

suffocates household resources across the region. Persistent conflict has correspondingly led to youth unemployment, as agricultural livelihoods decline and a growing share of household income is redirected toward personal and family security rather than productive investment.

Political Impact

SALW possession, illegal proliferation, and the armed conflict they sustain have had significant political consequences for the Niger Delta and for Nigeria more broadly. Scholars broadly agree that the illegal proliferation of SALWs poses a serious challenge to national security and that the excessive availability and spread of SALWs in the Niger Delta has a direct influence on the escalation of conflict and insecurity elsewhere in the country. The spread of SALWs has increased both the frequency and destructiveness of armed confrontation in the region, resulting in continuing loss of life and destruction of property.

The political salience of SALW-armed non-state actors extends into the Niger Delta's coastal waters, where the same weapons ecosystem sustained a wave of piracy and armed robbery at sea that peaked at 123 recorded Gulf of Guinea incidents in 2020. Coordinated naval deployment, including Nigeria's Deep Blue maritime security project, reduced this to 45 incidents in 2021 and to just five in the first quarter of 2023, illustrating both the scale of the security challenge the region's SALW proliferation has historically posed and the extent to which sustained state investment in security capacity can, at least partially, contain it (United Nations Security Council, 2023). This trend nonetheless remains fragile and reversible, underscoring that policing alone cannot substitute for addressing the political grievances discussed below.

SALW possession and mismanagement have destabilised the region's political governance, as public resources are redirected toward security and conflict management rather than toward addressing the structural grievances that underlie the conflict, producing a fragmented governance landscape in which multiple armed and unarmed actors compete for control. This dynamic increases corruption and weakens state institutions, further undermining efforts to address the region's underlying political and developmental grievances. Communities across the Niger Delta continue to report feelings of political marginalisation and unfair treatment by the federal government; this is a continuing grievance, which long predates the discovery of oil and is rooted in the historical patterns of exploitation that the study has noted. It has contributed to the persistence of armed conflict as a vehicle through which communities express grievance against both the federal government and multinational oil companies.

Policy Implications

Relying on the preceding historical, causal, and human security analysis, the study identifies the following policy priorities:

1. Strengthen the supply-side arms control through stricter enforcement of the ECOWAS Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation, and Manufacture of Small Arms and Light Weapons and through the effective operationalisation of Nigeria's National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCCSALW).
2. Improve border and maritime surveillance across the Niger Delta's creeks and coastal waters, given the documented role of porous borders and weak maritime policing in sustaining both arms trafficking and Gulf of Guinea piracy (UNODC, 2023).
3. Institutionalise community-based disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programmes that go beyond the 2009 Amnesty Programme, with sustained, transparent monitoring of weapons surrender and post-amnesty reintegration outcomes.
4. Addressing the structural drivers of demand, including youth unemployment, weak public service delivery, and corruption, which the analysis identifies as central to sustained local demand for illegal weapons.
5. Supporting community-led cultural and psychosocial recovery programmes in areas affected by prolonged conflict to address the human security deficits documented in the social and cultural domain.
6. Investing in disaggregated, community-level data collection on SALW possession in the Niger Delta specifically, building on the national baseline established by the Small Arms Survey's 2021 National Small Arms and Light Weapons Survey.

Conclusion

This study has examined the historical evolution, drivers, and impact of illegal SALW proliferation on the intensity and duration of armed conflict in the Niger Delta. It has shown that the region's contemporary arms economy is not a recent, demand-driven phenomenon but the outcome of historically continuous supply channels that are traceable from the transatlantic slave trade, through colonial conquest and the palm oil trade, to Cold War-era arms transfers and the post-independence petroleum economy. Analysed through a human security framework, the study has demonstrated that illegal SALW proliferation produces

measurable deficits across the social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions of security in Niger Delta communities, deficits that in turn help to explain why armed conflict in the region has proved so difficult to resolve durably.

In relation to the study's objectives, the analysis has traced the historical sources of SALW proliferation in the region, identified governance failure, weak border control, corruption, and unemployment as its principal contemporary drivers, assessed its multidimensional human security impact, and proposed a set of coordinated policy interventions. The study's principal contribution lies in its integration of the historical supply-side account of Niger Delta arms proliferation with a systematic, theoretically grounded analysis of its consequences which the existing literature has not, to date, provided. Future research would benefit from primary, community-level evidence collection on SALW possession and circulation specific to the Niger Delta, comparable to the national baseline established by the Small Arms Survey (2021), and from closer empirical examination of the linkages between Niger Delta arms trafficking networks and the wider Gulf of Guinea and Sahelian security complex identified in recent scholarship (UNODC, 2023). Such research would allow future studies to move beyond the historical and documentary analysis offered here toward a more precise, quantitatively grounded understanding of contemporary SALW flows in the region.

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