

THE PROLIFERATION OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS IN WEST AFRICA, AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SUB-REGION

¹Ojinnaka Ify Evaristus PhD & ²Uhuegbu Ifeoma PhD

¹Research Scholar, Geo-Politics, Peace and Conflict Studies, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

²Political Science, Imo State University Owerri, Nigeria.

leinndoprojects@gmail.com

Abstract

This Paper examined the problem of proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons and its implications for the West African sub-region. The increasing wave of proliferation of SALW across the West Africa have resulted in series of wars, violent crimes, insurgencies, militancy, armed banditry and terrorism, which have ravaged lives and properties of many people in West African countries, including Nigeria, Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso and Niger. This has created some security and developmental challenges in the sub-region, as efforts by ECOWAS, NGOs and Civil Societies to combat the menace have not yielded the desired result. Secondary sources of data collection were used in the study and the data collected was contently analyzed. The study finds that efforts to effectively check the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons have been undermined by factors of corruption, trans-border migration, porous international borders, systemic regulatory inefficiency and poverty among others. The paper recommends that; ECOWAS should show renewed vigor in addressing the problem of proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons, develop effective and efficient measures for improved boarder control, the banning of undocumented trans-border migrations, establishment of effective mechanism for enforcement of arms control, the reconstitution of boarder security architecture, establishment of a sub-regional agency for boarder control, and ECOWAS should address the complex socio-political and economic factors that engender conflicts. Equally, the paper urges the West African countries to pay attention to gathering and sharing of intelligence information.

Keywords: Arms Proliferation, Terrorism, Small Arms and Light Weapons, Security and Developmental challenges, and Trans Border Migration, Arms Control

I. Introduction

Background to the Study

The increasing proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in West Africa has in the recent times been a source of deep concerns among scholars of Peace, Conflict and Security Studies and other stakeholders in the sub-region. According to Malam, (2014a), Gikonyo (2015) and Bestman (2007) Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) have different categories such as pistols, revolvers, hunting rifles, craft weapons, pump-action, shotguns and (light) machine guns such as Beretta 12S and AR-70, grenade, MAT 49, Sten MK 2, Czech Model 26 and Model 59 (Rachot), MG 36, Tokarev TT and Marakov PM pistols, AK-47, AK-49, the German G3, the Belgian FN-FAL, M16, the Czech machine guns and the Serbian RPGs, M16, rocket launcher, and shoulder missile. These weapons have constituted a major source of insurgency, population displacement, armed banditry, and exacerbated ethnic and communal conflicts (Malam, 2014a; Gikonyo, 2015). This account for the rising cases of armed conflicts, total wars, violent crimes, terrorism, banditry and armed insurgency and has made the West African leaders to seek restrictions of the production, stockpiling, proliferation and usage of both Small Arms and Light Weapons. According to Barry (2012) arms control or arms restriction is term for international restrictions upon the development, production, stockpiling, proliferation and usage of small arms, conventional weapons, and weapons of mass destruction.

The efforts by the ECOWAS sub-regional Intergovernmental Organization to restrict the proliferation of SALW has been through the diplomacy via policy frameworks, agreements and arms control treaties. Diplomatic channels are considered as viable option to resolve the numerous security challenges which have undermined the peace and stability of the sub-region (Ojinnaka, 2020). ECOWAS policy frame work contends that International Treaties and Agreements on Arms Control can be used to get both consenting and non-consenting countries to stop the proliferations of Small Arms and Light Weapons, in order to limit the possibility of arms conflicts and violent crimes, hence, peace and security concerns remains necessary environment for attainment of the broad goals and vision (Berman and Katic, 2003) of the West Africa sub region in particular, and the world in general.

The United Nations Organization (UNO), the African Union (AU) and many other multilateral organizations including the Economic Community for West Africa (ECOWA) have sought to address the challenges of arms proliferation and have designed a number of measures aimed at combating illicit arms flows. If some of these initiatives are effectively implemented, it has real possibility that the flow of illicit arms in the West Africa in particular, indeed Africa in general will be stemmed (Alusala, 2018). Alusala (2018) in his article "Africa and arms control: Challenges and successes" acknowledged that many African countries have adopted a number of regional and global policies on arms control. However, there is an indication of wider transnational organizes crime; as many armed groups, terror organizations and criminal networks have continued illicit arms proliferations by exploit gaps in the regulatory systems, porous borders and weak law enforcement procedures. In West African sub-regional diplomacy, arms control are seen by many experts and scholars of International relations and strategic studies as mechanism against war, to limit the development and building of certain category of weapons including Small and Light weapons and ensuring that such weapons do not get into the hands of some unlawful elements that can use them to create security problems or destabilize the sub-region.

II. Statement of the Problem

The persistence and the complication of wars and conflicts in West Africa are due to proliferation in Small Arms Light Weapons in the sub-region. Small arms and light weapons have different categories including locally made SALM in West Africa that has led to rise of notorious and deadly armed militias that are capable of endangering the security of the sub-region (Bashir and Yahaya, 2025). Because of the failure of Arms Control Measures, and the resultant proliferation in Small Arms and Light Weapons, which have seen these weapons in the hands of some criminal elements, the West African sub-region have witnessed increased activities of rebel groups, armed gangs, terrorists and dangerous religious sects whose activities have had serious implications for the peace, stability and socio-economic and political development of the sub-region.

The International Action Network on Small Arms, Safer world, and Oxfam International reportS that armed conflict cost Africa \$18 billion each year and about US\$300 billion from 1990-2005 (Oxfam, 2017). During this period of ten (10) years after, West African countries; Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leon, Mali, and Burkina Faso, had horrible armed conflicts (John and Ngomb, 2025). In spite of the avowed commitment of the West African political leaders to combat the menace of proliferation, circulation, and trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) the menace still pervades in some of these countries in West Africa (Ojinnaka, 2020).

Equally, the alarming rate of proliferations of SALW in the sub-region made ECOWAS leaders to seek to address the challenges of weak regulatory systems, porous borders and weak law enforcement procedures through the regional mechanism procedures as a way to prevent flow of SALW across the West African borders. Notwithstanding the efforts of ECOWAS leaders, little progress has been made in the war against trafficking in SALW. This is so, as the increasing conflicts and wars in West Africa created phenomena of sabotage and Western conspiracy with due regards to arms transaction (Elemanya, 2018; 149).

The disturbing trend in the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the West African sub-region is the major concern of this study. This paper tends to examine the factors responsible for proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapon in the West African Sub-region; arms control measures and its enforcement, and the implication of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the West African sub-region.

III. Literature Review

Elemanya (2018) argues that there is no universal accepted definition of Small Arms and Light Weapons because the understanding of what constitute these categories of weapons has undergone some changes due to the dynamics of technological development. However, good working definitions tend to describe such arms and weapons either by their configuration, characteristics, sizes, user perspective or a combination of some of these. Onyeneho (2006) posits that Arms control refers to the process of securing international agreements which places restrictions upon members, types, and performance characteristics of weapons. According to the scholar, Arms control therefore is a means of regulating, restraining and keeping in check the number, production and use of military hardware both conventional and strategic. He argue that arms control in its general sense involves both bargaining, negotiations, measures, agreements and in fact the whole processes involved in securing a meaningful reduction in the acquisitions, numbers, types and character of weapons in the international system.

Alusala (2018) contends that at policy level approach, Africa has been to explore some of the milestones reached in term of Africa's engagement in global arms-continent initiatives, especially those achieved by the AU and regional economic communities (RECs) and regional mechanisms (RMs). This help to provide an analysis of contemporary trends in illicit flows of arms on the continent and recommends on how to address the current challenges.

Writing on the role of the state in ensuring peace, security and good governance and safety of the people, Bashir and Yahaya (2025), Gauba (2003:176.), Misillegas, Monar, and Rees (2003) postulates on the effective capacity of the West African states to ensure the protection of the citizenry from any internal and external threat. Bashir and Yahaya argue that the state is an established institution responsible for the provision of welfare services to its people. While agreeing with Bashir and Yahaya, Gauba (2003) posits that the state came into existence for the sake of good life and it continues in being just for that sake and exists to serve the interests of all individuals or all sections of the society. In other words, the essence of the state is the promotion of good life and creation of conditions within the state that would enhance the welfare of the citizenry (Bashir and Yahaya (2025).

Again, Misillegas, Monar, and Rees (2003) observed that "providing internal security for citizens is among the essential public goods any state has to deliver and ranks high among its primary sources of legitimacy". Implied from this observation is the fact that the state exists in order to guarantee the security of its inhabitants, their persons and their property (Bashir and Yahaya, 2025). Misillegas, Monar, and Rees (2003) maintain that this view found its classic expression in John Locke's Second Treatise of Government which places greater emphasis on the rule of law in ensuring the individual's security. Bashir and Yahaya (2025), contends that in spite of the above authoritative submissions, an atmosphere of insecurity has enveloped the West African sub-region, suggesting that the West African states has failed in their primary responsibility of provisions of security and protection of lives and property of their people. For instance, the Boko Haram crisis, the Niger Delta Militancy, post-election violence, inter and intra party conflicts, Armed Robbery, Ethnic and religious clashes, youth's violence, kidnapping, and other related violent crimes have enveloped the West African Sub-region leading to wanton loss of lives and property and displacement of hundreds and thousands innocent citizens. The scholars notes that this unfortunate security situation is not unconnected with level of proliferation of small arms and light weapons which have aided the manifestation of armed conflicts, insurgency, terrorism, militancy, assassination, ethno-religious conflicts in the sub-region.

In another vein, Abdullahi (2010:147) as cited in Bashir and Yahaya (2025) posits that the growth and the widespread cases of Small and Light Arms proliferation in the West-African sub-region are aided by the strategic location of the West-African Sub-Region at the seaboard of Atlantic Ocean. African Researchers Magazine (2024) contends that the proliferation of small arms and light weapons has been a major problem on the African continent for many years. It has been considered as the main challenge to the development of the West Africa, as ECOWAS' has been battling against Small Arms and Light Weapon Proliferation in West Africa. Thus the West Africa has long been plagued by instability, violence, and underdevelopment, primarily due to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW).

Accordingly the African Union Press Statement (2017) on Bamako Declarations (2000) current initiatives as driven by the AU are largely built around the spirit of what is referred to as the Bamako Declaration, which was adopted by the Organization of African Unity in 2000. Alusala (2018) observe that since the Bamako Declaration, the AU and its sub-regional bodies have continued their search for a durable answer to the insecurity in the West African sub-region engendered by the illicit flows of Small arms and light weapons (SALW) and as a result of which several initiatives have followed. Also the AU Press Statement (2017) note that the 2013 Solemn Declarations is the AU's recent policy breakthrough in which Africa Amnesty Month, month for the surrender and collection of Illicit weapons inaugurated in September will be observed annually in September across the continent. The amnesty policy also known as Agenda 2063 is based on the 2013 Solemn Declaration by the Heads of State and Government of the African Union, aimed at providing a strategic framework for Africa's socio-economic transformation over the next 50 years. (AU, Press Statement, 2017).

The report of AU Steering Committee against Illicit Arms (2017) at the 2013 Solemn Declarations, states that the African leaders pledged not to bequeath the burden of conflict to the next generation and to end all conflicts on the continent by 2020. This they intend to achieve by ensuring the implementation of arms-control agreements, including those on conventional and non-conventional weapons. Accordingly, this led to evolving the AU Master Roadmap of Practical Steps to Silence the Guns in Africa by Year 2020. (Ehiane and Uwizeyimana, 2020; AU, Draft Report, 2017). This initiative appreciably re-energized the position of the AU as the major continental player in the efforts to tackle the menace of illicit arms flow and circulation.

Charbonneau (2013) posits that the Solemn Declaration is a clear sign that the African Union wants to tackle the problem of illicit flows of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) urgently. Agreeing with Charbonneau, Nayan (2015) posits that it is also a further indication of the commitment that Africa has already demonstrated globally. For example, in April 2013, when the UN General Assembly adopted the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), a multilateral instrument aimed at regulating the US\$70 billion international trade in conventional weapons, Africa whole heartedly supported its adoption.

Accordingly, the ECOWAS Moratorium (1998) shows that the West African countries have shown willingness to control proliferation of small Arms and light weapons in the sub-region. Even before the Bamako Declaration of 2000, the Heads of State of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1998, agreed on the Moratorium on the manufacture, importation and exportation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the sub-region. In 2006 the ECOWAS moratorium measures were changed into a convention that is legally binding which became operational on 29th September 2009. A study by Nelson Alusala on arms-control initiatives in Africa shows that the ECOWAS Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) project has achieved a wider and effective impact across the sub-region (Alusala, 2018). But the porosity of most of the West Africa's borders makes it fairly easy for illicit traffickers to move arms across borders, making it challenging to tackle the issue SALW proliferation. Hence regional projects that have the potential for greater information sharing, coordination and cooperation among participating states become very necessary (Ojinnaka, 2020; Elemanta, 2018).

Bashir and Yahaya (2025) assert that the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in West Africa poses significant threats to regional and national security, particularly Nigeria. The scholars posit that the implication of Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation in West African Sub-region on Nigerian Security has posed serious challenge to the peace and stability of Nigeria in particular and the West Africa in general. Bashir and Yahaya states that the West African sub-region is now awash with Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW). They note that there are approximately 500 million illicit weapons in circulation worldwide and the unfortunate situation in the West Africa is that the sub-region is intricately connected with its strategic location at the seaboard of Atlantic Ocean. The scholars argues that the SALW proliferation in West Africa fuel insurgency, banditry, kidnapping for ransoms, farmers-herders' conflicts, electoral violence, in Nigeria, thereby exacerbating humanitarian crises and undermining the state authority.

Bashir and Yahaya concludes that it would be meaningless to talk of comprehensive security in Nigeria in the midst of absence of good governance and pervasive leadership crises demonstrated in the form of absence of political will and commitment by Nigeria political actors to consciously implement programmes and policies that would promote socio-economic well-being of the country and also to embrace vital aspects of social and national development, such as the provision of employment opportunities and other basic social amenities that are vital for satisfying individuals' basic needs.

Kwaja (2021) contends that conflict escalation in different parts of Africa is amplified by several factors, including governance, corruption, historical antecedence of different wars and a quest for significance by various conflicts actors. The scholar posits that the proliferation of arms and different weapons have deepened the conflicts thereby leading to the collapse of the political, economic and social structures that could support peace across different societies. Kwaja maintain that illicit arms trade in Africa is amorphous; thus, creating increased illegal presence and accessibility to arms in virtually every country in the region. He notes that the clandestine nature of illicit arms trade affects societal progress, impeding development on many fronts. According to Kwaja, the impacts of arms proliferation in conflicts in Africa are complex and challenging to resolve because of the complacency of some political and state actors/regimes across the continent. Kwaja argue strongly that the spate of insurgency in the continent of Africa is escalated by these clandestine arms trade, enabling the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs), which then affects economic and social growth, inter-communal/social cohesion, and increases radicalization, violent extremism and inter-communal tension, promotes gun culture, and fosters inter-generational conflict and crisis.

The member countries of the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) are geographically contiguous and the region was marked by instability because many of the states experienced one intra-state conflict or another and one causative factor is the illicit proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) (Oluwafisan and Uchegbu, 2021). The illicit proliferation of SALWs is exacerbated by porosness of West Africa's borders fueled by corruption, increasingly sophisticated local manufacture, sometimes weak physical security and stockpile management which make the fight to control proliferation even more complex (Oluwafisan and Uchegbu, 2021). The political leadership at the highest level in ECOWAS member states has often displayed political will in the numerous decisions against the proliferation of SALWs. The watershed year was 1998 because Heads of State and Government adopted the Declaration of a Moratorium on the import, export and manufacture of Small Arms and Light Weapons. The Moratorium was transformed into the ECOWAS Convention in June 2006, to give the fight against the illicit proliferation more teeth and in the process of implementing this instrument and other related declarations and decisions, ECOWAS has interfaced with other stakeholders including multilateral organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and its various agencies, the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU). These initiatives they agree are having varied impacts in the ECOWAS member states, as the dynamics of proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in West Africa better explains the approach developed by ECOWAS member states

to meet the challenges towards controlling SALWs proliferation (Oluwafisan and Uchegbu, 2021).

Schelling (1960) in his work "The strategy of conflict" argue that formerly, concerns was about the character of weapons, but an unfortunate changes has focused concern on the numbers, which were not the original guiding principles. Schelling posits that this marks distortions in the original tenants of arms control, for instance rather than pursuing the variety or approaches advocated by early theorists of arms control, political leaders became obsessed by the pursuit of comprehensive accords. Schelling notes that as a result of these deviations, unnecessary delays have marred the ideals of arms control measures.

In the same vein, Onyeneho (2006; 89) observe that the manner in which arms control is being pursued presently is almost counterproductive, as it has led to increases in weaponry rather than the reverse. He notes that the interplay of domestic forces may lead to arms control negotiations increasing rather than reducing weapons total. Given the number of special interest groups that may be affected by the outcome of armed control negotiations, it is inevitable that building a domestic consensus behind arms control policy is a complex and time consuming process. Onyeneho maintains that to evaluate arms control, one need to concentrate on the political dimensions rather than the technical dimensions. Onyeneho concludes that arms control if intelligently pursued is capable of reducing the economic burden of maintaining a mutual security regime.

IV. Theoretical Framework

The Theory of Arms Control

This paper is predicated on the Arms Control theory as the intellectual framework of analysis. The contemporary intellectual precursors of Arms Control theory are Scholars and practitioners like John Steinbruner, Jonathan Dean, Stuart Croft, and Professor Aja Akpuru Aja. Hedley Bull, Bertrand Russel, and Andre Sakharov. These scholars in their respective theoretical and philosophical orientations share common fundamental ideas about Arms Control, and has worked expansively on the development of Arms Control paradigm. Britannica.com (2025) asserts that arms control involves collaboration between competitive or antagonistic states to limit weapons and reduce the likelihood of war. It can be achieved through direct arrangements between adversaries or multilaterally by the international community. Arms control is based on the belief that certain weapons are inhumane and should be banned, and that restricting armaments possessed by individual states or non-state actors can help prevent war (Britannica.com+2, 2025).

The theory of Arms control is meant to break the security dilemma confronting the contemporary global system. The theory focuses primarily on measures to stop the proliferation of weapons through regulating the production, stockpiling, distribution, sales and usage of certain category of weapons (Ojinnaka, 2020). While the theory emphasizes on non-proliferation of arms, it encourages strengthening of regulatory regimes in respect to weapons of warfare. Onyeneho (2006) contends that arms control theory centers on the process of securing international agreements which places restrictions upon numbers, types, and performance characteristics of weapons. According to the scholar, arms control therefore is a means of regulating, restraining and keeping in check the number, production and use of military hardware both conventional and strategic. He argues that Arms control in its general sense involves both bargaining, negotiations, measures, agreements and in fact the whole processes involved in securing a meaningful reduction in the acquisitions, numbers, types and character of weapons in the international system.

According to Onyeneho to evaluate the theory of Arms control, one needs to concentrate on the political dimensions rather than the technical dimensions. He notes that the interplay of domestic forces may lead to arms control negotiations increasing rather than reducing weapons total. Given the number of special interest groups that may be affected by the outcome of armed control negotiations, it is inevitable that building a domestic consensus behind arms control policy is a complex and time consuming process, hence, arms

control if intelligently pursued is capable of reducing the economic burden of maintaining a mutual security regime (Encyclopedia of the New American Nation, nd).

A renowned expert in international relations, contemporary and strategic studies Professor Aja Akpuru Aja maintain that the theory of Arms Control is a grand strategy aimed at mutual security, and stability of the international system. Professor Aja states that arms control comes with cost effectiveness and damage control system, as the preservation of the stability of the international system might make for mutually agreed mechanism for controlling illicit flows of arms. As we shall see later in this study, the nature of proliferation in Small Arms and Light Weapons in the contemporary era of globalization, in the West African sub-region justifies the adoption of Arms control theory as the intellectual framework of analysis of this study. However, the theory of arms control have further enriched our understanding of the complexities of arms proliferation in the West African sub-region, and its challenges therein, as we consider the theory suitable for this study.

V. Research Method

In this research, we have used secondary sources for data collection. We rely on scholarly materials that are relevant to proliferation of illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons in the West Africa sub-region. Published materials like books, Journals, Periodicals, Seminars, as well as Policy Papers and Conference materials were main sources of data used in the study. The accessibility of these relevant materials enabled us to carry out exhaustive and detailed research on the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) and its implication on the West African sub-region. Also, the data used was contently analyzed.

Factors Responsible for Arms Proliferations in the West African Sub-Region

Onuoha (2011) as cited in Bashir and Yahaya (2025) posits that the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SAWL) is the illicit act of importing, exporting, acquisition, sale, delivery and movement or transfer of firearms or their parts and components and ammunitions from or across the territory of one state to another without the authorization or in violation of legislation or regulations of state security laws. This illicit movement of weapons, in particular, Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) has been prevalent and widespread within the West African sub-region (Bashir and Yahaya, 2025).

Obviously, there are number of factors that are responsible for the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the West African sub-region. The study executed by EINNO Projects Nigeria (2023) finds that the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the West Africa have had serious devastating consequences on the security and stability of West Africa, as it has led to endless conflicts and instability in the sub-region. The West African Sub-region has been an area of important arms proliferation due of their affordability, accessibility, availability, weak control measures and porosity of borders and inadequate legal frameworks that legitimize or prohibit their use (Ojinnaka, 2020; Kelli, 2008; Kwaja, 2012). The West Africa sub-region accounts for the proliferation of about 100,000 of the world's illegal Small Arms and Light Weapons out of the 100 million circulating in Africa (EINNO Projects Nigeria, 2023). Out of which insurgent organizations and other criminal armed groups in West African are supposedly in control of 77,000 of the small arms in the sub-region (Ebo and Mazal, 2003). However, bad socio-economic conditions of the people due to years of bad governances brought hardship to the lives of many in the sub-region, thereby creating humanitarian crisis. The crisis in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Nigeria are socially induced and has almost crippled social life, and brought conflicts and civil strife in which violence and incessant massacres become order of the day (Annan, 2016).

These factors are prominent among the factors that engender the lingering and the prevalence of conflicts in the West African sub-region (Bashir and Yahaya, 2025) and are/were directly or remotely connected to social factors like poverty, economic marginalization, corruption and social alienation all of which are the bi-product of bad governances and are prominent among the factors that engender the lingering and the prevalence of conflicts in the West African sub-region (Bashir and Yahaya ,2025).

Consequently as it were, many lost confidence in the system and the biased and the alienated people in the society are/were easily recruited by armed non-state actors: militants, survivors of the wars, insurgent groups, and terrorists organization who for years have seen proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation (SALWP) as a means of making living (EINNO Projects Nigeria, 2023). In other words, the socio-economic crises in the West African Sub-region have abetted proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in sub-region (Bashir and Yahaya, 2025).

Both Macaver and Maianguwa (2003; and Hallendendu and Madaki, 2003) as cited in Bashir and Yahaya (2025) agree that poverty is a situation whereby the individual is not able to meet the basic necessity of life. The extreme poverty and hardship in many West African countries has greatly engendered arms proliferation in the sub-region. Over 80% of citizens of the West African State are living below poverty line. The condition of poverty is one of the major factors that retard the development of the West African sub- region. For instance, lack of infrastructural development and lack of access to basic social in the West Africa, resulting from bad governance is major contributory factor to arms proliferation and violent conflicts in the sub-region (Ojinnaka, 2020). This has not only weakened the fragile peace and stability of the sub-region, but has undermined the basis of co-existence in some countries in the sub-region (Macaver and Maianguwa, 2003; and Hallendendu and Madaki, 2003), as cited in Bashir and Yahaya (2025).

Furthermore, geographical proximity of the West African states to shore of the Atlantic Ocean make the sub region sub susceptible to arms proliferation. Geographically, 13 out of 16 countries of the sub- region are at the seabed of the Atlantic Ocean, as the sub-region is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean (Onuoha, 2011; as cited in Bashir and Yahaya, 2025)) which makes the sub region most vulnerable to proliferation of small arms and light weapons. The strategic position of the sub-region is acknowledged by some geo-strategic thinkers as an important contributory factor to arms proliferation in the sub-region, as the sub region provides a link by sea between North Africa and the Western Europe (Abdullahi, 2010). Basically, this is why the history of the West Africa is replant with instances of ethnic conflicts, religious conflicts, military Coups and civil wars. For instance, there has been series of conflicts, military Coup and civil wars in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Ivory Gambia, and Benin. Over times, this situation of arms proliferation and armed conflicts has conspicuously undermined the economic development, political and social cohesion of the West African countries (Ojinnaka 2020). According to Bashir and Yahaya (2025) the situation of conflicts provide a ground for movement of small arms and light weapons in the sub-region, particularly, Nigeria because of its porous border which have nursed and fueled the growth and the development of insurgency, militancy and communal clashes in the country.

In similar vein, the numerous cases of human rights violations in the West Africa sub-region have often led to violent conflicts and civil strife in the sub-region. Human rights violations are a contributory factor to arms proliferation in the sub-region. Human Right Watch argue that in addition to cases of ethnic cleansing, reprisal killings, impunity by state officials ,social injustice and unequal allocation of state resources among others (HRW, 2003) and the injustices and lack of confidence of the people in the Judicial system have encouraged people to take to self-help. The violations of the human rights in Nigeria and lack of respect of rule of law and due process in Nigeria is alarming. It is part of the government mishandling of the agitation for the re-establishment of the sovereign state of Biafra. For instance, in Nigeria, the state security institutions has been used to try to violently suppress the Biafra agitation, and have records violation of the rights of the Biafra agitators as many of the agitators has been harassed, arrested and killed by Federal government troops while demonstrating for support of restoration of the state of Biafra.

The agitation for Biafra became tensed under Former President Buhari, as the people of the South Eastern Nigeria protested the against the exclusion of the South-East region of Nigeria from key political appointments, appointment of Service Chiefs and location of vital national economic assets and development projects by the administration. This led to

progressive growth of ethnic consciousness, feelings of ethnic alienation, widespread discontent and become an important factor in resurgence of ethno-nationalism (Ojinnaka, 2021) as the people felt they have been shoved out of the corporate existence of Nigeria (Isiguzoro, 2021), by the deliberate policy of exclusion by the Buhari administration. The structured marginalization of South East region in the Nigerian state, particularly in terms of power equation and wealth distribution (Kenechukwu, 2021; Ojinnaka, 2021) made many in the geopolitical zone to lose confidence in the Nigerian project and to feel they have no stake in Nigerian state. It stimulated resurgence of ethno-nationalism and engendered the loyalty and allegiance of the people of South East Nigeria to their ethno- nation, rather than to the Nigerian state (Ojinnaka, 2021).

Furthermore, executive recklessness and extrajudicial killings that took place in the South-East Nigeria between 2015 and 2020 tremendously contributed to the resurgence of ethno-nationalism and consequent arms proliferation in the South Eastern Nigeria. There have been recent records of high level of security sector violence by the Nigeria Police and military against unarmed civilians in the region (Ojinnaka, 2021). Human rights groups have documented Nigerian military and police using excessive force against unarmed pro-Biafra protestors (Human Right Writers Association of Nigeria. HURIWA, 2022, September 17). Investigative reports by the Press and concerned media organizations found that within the period under study there were 117 killings and 26 abductions in the South-East (Punch Newspaper 2021, August 16; Daily Trust Newspaper, 2021, September 17). In the same period, attacks attributed to Unknown Gun Men in the region led to the killings of 18 persons in 12 attacks (Fidelis and Idowu, 2021).

Also, in 2020 nationwide End SARS protest which was a demand for an end to police abuses, particularly, the abuse by the Federal Special Anti-Robbery Squad (FSARS) (Mark, 2021). There was killing of many armless protesters in October 2020 during the End SARS marches in the South East geopolitical zone. It is also on record that between 2015 and 2020, the Nigeria Directorate of State Security Service (DSSS) has regularly harassed and detained journalists with impunity, including invading courtroom to re-arrest defendants whom the judge had ordered be set free (Mark, 2021). Violence against civilians in the region by Nigeria security forces made many to lose confidence in the Nigerian project and contributed to motivating young men in the region to join militant groups (Mark, 2021).

According to an investigation published by Amnesty International Report (2016) there was also killing of 150 unarmed and peaceful IPOB supporters and members in 2015 and 2016. Again, on the 49th anniversary of the declaration of Biafra independence, on 30th May, 2016, security teams that included members of the military, police and allied security agencies opened fire on a parade in Onitsha. Amnesty International Report (2016) posits that at least 60 people were killed and 70 injured. Furthermore, executive recklessness and extrajudicial killings that took place in the South-East Nigeria between 2015 and 2020 tremendously contributed to the resurgence of ethno-nationalism in the region and proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons. Thus impunity for human rights abuse by state officials in part led to the violent conflict has taken place between the Nigeria security forces and the Biafra agitators (Ojinnaka, 2021). Due to the continuous existence of these repressive acts of human rights violations and deliberate policy of exclusion and marginalization against the people of Biafra, particularly among the Ibo ethnic group, the people have continued to agitate for reestablishment of the Republic of Biafra, as they see in the Biafra Project as the lasting hope for peace and development of the area (Ojinnaka, 2021). All these also have the capacity to make arms proliferation to thrive in the West African sub-region.

However, the attitude of the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) towards the rampaging activities of the armed Fulani herdsmen particularly, the inability of the security agencies to handle the security challenges resulting from herdsmen threats indicate fundamental defects in the nation's security structure and have had multifaceted effects on Nigeria national security (Ojinnaka, 2021). The indigenous people try to procure weapons to protect themselves from the Fulani terrorist due to the incapacity of the security agencies to

live up to the expectation of their statutory responsibilities. This has resulted in arms proliferations and increased violent crimes in Nigeria, as some dangerous weapons are now in the hands of some criminal elements (Ojinnaka, 2021).

Equally, human rights violations in seemingly stable West African countries such as the Gambia and Equatorial Guinea are increasingly creating precarious situations for instability. Although these countries have not experienced large-scale violent conflicts in recent times as their neighbors have, the brutal, undemocratic, unequal and authoritative rule by incumbent regimes is creating tensions which, unresolved, could bring the countries to a boiling point of violent war and civil strife (Bashir and Yahaya, 2025). The implication of the human rights abuses in the West African States, and its threat analysis indicates that the security of some West African States is highly endangered, and the ample consequences are the current deterioration of the security situations in the sub-region due to proliferation of small arms and light weapons (Ojinnaka, 2022).

Arms Control Enforcement in West African Sub-Region

Elemanya (2018), Ogaba (2005) are in agreement that Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in West Africa sub-region have in the recent times increased due to systemic incapability for regulating the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons which characterized most of the West African states where appropriate national institutions are either not in place or are weak. Furthermore, arms proliferation undermines the authority of the state. In the West Africa sub-region, little or no serious consideration is given to regulatory framework in the conduct of arms regulated transactions, and when regulated at all, it is ridiculed by corruption in the state institutions which are often incapacitated or sometime ill equipped to tackle the complex case of arms proliferations. On this note, Elemanya (2018) states that the continued increase in the rate of arms proliferation in West African states is a consequence of poor regulatory capacity of the desired institutions.

However, arms control enforcement has in the recent times faced so many challenges in the West African sub-region. In the recent years, some countries in the sub-region has seen lingering and atrocious crimes and conflicts due to failure of arms control measures that have seen weapons in the hands of some bandits and criminal elements, who has terrorized innocent citizens and made some states ungovernable. Nigeria, Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, Niger among other West Africa countries has witnessed many protracted and gruesome conflicts caused by the terrorists herdsmen and bloody Jihadists, who have invade communities, occupied farm lands, killing hundreds of people in their homes thereby negating the authority of the states in the sub-region.

The emerging trend in the sophistication of the crisis resulting in colossal loss of lives and properties, have generated insecurity and threatening the cooperate existence of the nation-states (Poroma, Deedan, and Igwe, 2019). Not only the potential destabilizing effects of SALW in the hands of these Fulani terrorists, our worries is the efficacy of the strategies adopted by the security agencies in addressing the emerging security challenge (Poroma, Deedan, and Igwe, 2019).

Nevertheless, the Economic Community for West Africa (ECOWA) has shown willingness to address the problems of proliferation of small Arms and Light Weapons in the sub-region. The ECOWAS has adopted a number of arms control measures aimed at combating illicit arms flows in the sub-region, According to Alusala (2016) if these initiatives are effectively implemented, they has real possibility that the flow of illicit arms in West Africa be stemmed.

In the West Africa sub-region, arms control is seen as mechanism to limit the development, building, trading and distribution of certain category of weapons, (both Small Arms and Light Weapons, and non-conventional weapons), and to ensure that countries in the sub-region do not consider war as a viable instrument of national policy. To this end, the Economic Community of the West African States (ECOWAS) has through regional mechanism sought to address the challenges of weak regulatory systems, porous borders and

weak law enforcement procedures. Even before the Bamako Declaration of 2000, the Heads of State of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1998, agreed on the Moratorium on the importation, exportation and manufacture of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the sub-region. In 2006, the ECOWAS moratorium measures were changed into a convention that is legally binding which became operational on 29th September 2009 (ECOWAS Moratorium, 1998; Bamako Declaration, 2000).

A study by Alusala (2016) on Arms-Control Initiatives in Africa shows that the ECOWAS SALW project has achieved a wider and effective impact across the sub-region. But the porosity of most of the West Africa's borders makes it fairly easy for illicit traffickers to move arms across borders, making it challenging to tackle the issue. Equally, ECOWAS Moratorium (1998) points to the fact that the West African countries have shown willingness to control proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the sub-region, hence regional projects have the potential for greater information sharing, coordination and cooperation among participating states.

Nevertheless, due to weak border control mechanism, some countries in the West African sub-region sometimes undermine the terms of Arms Control Agreement. This is even so because there is no stipulated sanctions for treaty defaulting countries, and no effective mechanism for enforcement of sanctions against them. As a result of this situation, the enforcement of sanctions against the defaulting states become jumbled, and measures more a matter of politics than adherence to the terms (Harald, 2005) of Arms Control Agreement. Professor Harald Müller in a Briefing Paper to the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission (WMDC) entitled "Law instead of lawless self-help" notes that sanctions and other measures tended to be advocated against violators of Arms control treaties has been primarily by their natural political enemies, while violations have been ignored or given only token measures by their political allies (Harald, 2005). This has made the enforcement and regulatory mechanism of arms control weak and ineffective. This is why, in spite of the efforts by ECOWAS in its sub-regional initiatives and reduction strategies, SALW has remained the major sustenance and promoter of the culture of conflict in (West) Africa (Weiss, 2003), and some other sub-regional initiatives like the implemented Moratorium aimed at limiting arms proliferation have recorded, but little or no success (Ogaba, 2005). Today, the West African countries have not realized the objective of the war against proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the sub-region. The problem of arms proliferation has continued unabated. The relevant government agencies in the West African countries should be well equipped, and good policy instruments put in place to check the free flow of Small Arms and Light Weapons.

The Implications of the Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapon (SALW) in the West African Sub-Region

The increasing proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the West Africa is responsible for the high rate of armed conflicts and violent crimes in the sub-region. Malam (2014 b) opine that the increasing rate of violence in the area can be attributed to the continued proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW). Though West Africa is not known to be a mass producer of instruments of warfare like SALW, and yet it is beleaguered with Small Arms and Light Weapons. Since the end of the Cold War, Africa's proportion of the global conflict death rate has been on the increase, particularly, the case of West Africa has been attributed to the horrific increase in the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the sub-region (Grip, 2017).

Elemanya (2018), Malam (2014) and Onuoha (2010) agree that the sources of Small Arms and Light Weapon proliferation in Africa, indeed, West Africa are varied and many, as they are effective means through which arms are proliferated within the sub-region. Conflicts, coups, counter coup and civil wars in West Africa provides a perfect opportunity for the West to counteract the arms glut created by the Cold War politics, particularly, in the Eastern Europe, as regulations are often flouted and arms diverted to unauthorized actors which are later used for illicit purposes (Elemanya, 2018). The huge global industrial arms

production capacity ; the Cold War politics and its aftermath conflict in the sub-region which necessitates needs for more arms and; including supply and manufacturing both within and outside the sub-region, and considerably large numbers are imported arms among others are the means through which arms are proliferated within the sub-region (Onuoha, 2010). This is in addition to knowledge in arms manufacturing by the local people otherwise known as local production, theft from government armories and returning soldiers from peacekeeping operations. According to Elemanya (2018) none of these variables is independent or self-determining, they are not water tight compartment, and sometimes are a consequences of others.

However, the dynamics of conflicts in the West Africa, and the present proliferation of SALW can properly be understood by thorough knowledge and analysis of the past and present security situation, as well as the sources and rout of inflow of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the sub- region. It was small arms proliferation that fired the conflict in Liberia, Sierra Leone, cote d'ivoire, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo (Ojinnaka, 2020; Keili, 2008; Kwaja, 2012) and Nigeria. Since the Civil Wars in Liberia, Sierra Leon, Cote d'Ivoire, Chad, and the deteriorating security situation in Nigeria, particularly in the Northern Nigeria and Guinea, the West Africa have seen unprecedented democratization of armed violence. Today, there is no country in West Africa that is spared from the reign of terror fuelled by the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (Ojinnaka, 2020).

Equally, Ero and Ndinga-Muvumba (2004) highlights that small arms proliferation has funded the mobilization for coups d'état, undemocratic toppled of government, upsurge of casualties and violent inter-communal and intra-state conflicts in the West Africa, hence since 1960, there have been over 37 successful coup d'état in almost all the West African countries, often resulting in violent wars, massacre of millions of people and forcefully displacing many (Keili, 2008; Kwaja, 2012). Small Arms Survey (2016) show that conflict in most west African countries like the Sierra Leone, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria are influenced by proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the sub-region, as the weapons are being recycled among the warring factions, arms dealers, and security forces (Gikonyo, 2015).

According to an extensive study conducted by EINNO Projects Nigeria on arms proliferation, the inaccuracy of data about the rate SALW inflow in the West Africa is a major setback to measures adopted by the sub-regional body to stem the circulation SALW in the sub-region. Thus lack of accurate data on SALW inflow has engendered the capacity of the states to uphold order and implement policy and human security (Sorensen and Soderbaum, 2012). In Nigeria, given the history of armed violence steaming from social and political conflict generated by oil production in the Niger Delta region, oil exploration and its subsequent environmental impact are the major causes of proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the country (EINNO Projects Nigeria, 2023). The political economy of natural resources has sustained the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Niger Delta part of the country. The outcome of the EINNO Projects research finds that the struggle for the control of natural resources aids the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Nigeria (EINNO PROJECTS Nigeria, 2023).

In the same vein, Vines (2005) contends that the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the West African sub-region has been influenced by varied factors such as the past and present conflict, growing importation of arms, corrupt border security and increasing artisan production, all of which are factors of globalization. Many countries in the West African sub-region, particularly, Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, and Guinea (Vines, 2005), Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso has in the recent times witnessed increased activities of bandits, terrorist organizations and Islamic Jihadists fighting to take control of the state. This is fuelled by the significant proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the sub-region.

Elemanya (2018) also has adopted global correlation, and posits that the contemporary societies are continually influenced or affected by the globalization process which gives an idea that the entire world is thriving towards a uniformed practice and ideological coherence. With regards of arms it takes two dimensions, one is that it facilitates

the activities of arms brokers in the transactions and shipments or delivery of arms, and been a consequence of advance in science and technology, means that locals at remote spot of the globe will acquire production skills. In brief, the increasing globalization and electronic info-commerce make it easier than ever for experienced arms dealer to circumvent national arms and international arms control systems and to exploit the weakest links in the fragile international regulatory chain (Elemanya, 2018; 149). This disturbing trend in arms proliferation is adjudged to be an immediate challenge to peace, security, and sustainable development of the West African sub-region (Malam, 2014a).

This is added to the fact that this horrific arms proliferation has remained a pervasive issue, as it has led to increase the severity of conflicts and extend the massive spread of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) such as the pistol, grenade, machine gun, rifle (AK-47 and M16), rocket launcher, and shoulder missile, and has constituted a major source of population displacement, insurgency, and exacerbated ethnic and communal conflicts (Malam, 2014a; Gikonyo, 2015).

VI. Conclusions

In the recent times, there is an inglorious increase in the rate of proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the West Africa, as a result, the sub-region has witnessed more conflicts, violent crimes, terrorism, armed banditry and wars. Obviously, this is due to the failure of ECOWAS arms control mechanism, which have seen weapons in the hands of some criminal elements who has terrorized and killed many innocent citizens, created insecurity and threatening the cooperate existence of the some countries in the sub-region.

The entire West Africa sub-region is in security crisis. The sub-region is in serious security dilemma, hence effective measures needs to be put in place to tackle the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons. The understanding of this precarious security situation made the West African political leaders to express collective commitment to adopting policy measures to address the challenges of proliferations of Small Arms and Light Weapons. In spite the commitment shown by West African leaders through regional and sub-regional mechanism like the Bamako Declaration of 2000, the ECOWAS Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation and Manufacture of Small Arms and Light Weapons of 1998, which was changed into a convention in 2006 and became operational in 29th September, 2009, not much progress has been made in terms of the control of proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (Ojinnaka, 2020). This is due to institutional incapacity, weak regulatory systems, porous borders, and weak law enforcement procedures, which has made it possible for speculators and dealers on Small Arms and Light Weapons to circumvent the West African arms control systems and to exploit the weakest links in the fragile international regulatory chain. Hence, menace of proliferation, circulation, and trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons still pervades many countries in the sub-region.

Obviously, the peace and security of the West African sub-region has been seriously affected by the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons. This has not only undermined the capacity of the West African States to maintain law and order, preserve territorial integrity, sovereignty and cooperate existence, but has undermined the prospect for sustainable social, political and economic development of the sub-region, as militants, bandits, Jihadist, Boko Haram and other terrorists and criminal organizations have continued to unleash mayhem in the sub-region.

VII. Recommendations

The paper recommends that the members of the Economic Community of the West African States (ECOWAS) should show renewed vigor in addressing the problem of proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons through its various sub-regional initiatives.

The paper recommends that ECOWAS should consider developing effective and efficient measures for improved boarder control, and ensure objective implementation of the agreed measures by the member states. This requires the reconstitution of its boarder security architecture, and establishment of a sub-regional agency for boarder control.

Equally, ECOWAS should address the complex socio-political and economic factors that engender conflicts in the sub-region. Issues like bad governance, poverty, mass unemployment, judicial corruption, social injustices, pre-election and post-election violence, human rights violations and other socio-political and economic dynamics that directly or remotely engenders proliferation of Arms in the member states should be addressed.

Again, ECOWAS should evolve a sanctions regime system and establish a framework for sanctioning member states that contravene the arms control agreements.

Above all, the paper recommends that the governments of the West African countries and their security outfits should pay serious attention in gathering and sharing of intelligence information, which would enable them to be proactive in their strategy for to act decisively against proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the sub-region.

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