BORDER SECURITY, SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS PROLIFERATION IN AKWA IBOM AND CROSS RIVER BETWEEN 2010 AND 2025 CASE STUDY

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Keywords

Border Security, Small Arms and Light Weapons, Proliferation, Interagency Collaboration and Queer Ladder Theory

Abstract

Objective of the Study: *The study examined border security challenges and Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States between 2010 and 2025 with a focus on Mbo and Ikom LGAs.*
Research Problem: *This study addresses the illicit trafficking of arms through unofficial routes and weak surveillance, personnel, intelligence, coordination, and control to enhance border security.*
Methods/Theory: The study adopted Queer Ladder Theory and phenomenological design. The research used 15 Key Informant Interviews, two Focus Group Discussions, and documents as data collection methods. The study used purposive sampling and thematic analysis.
Results: *The study revealed that SALW proliferation was high due to rugged terrain, unofficial routes, weak surveillance and enforcement and illicit economic activities. SALW facilitated the continuation of kidnapping, armed robbery, communal clashes, and insecurity. The study also revealed major challenges in the study area, including slow intelligence sharing, communication gaps, duplication of effort, inadequate logistics, and surveillance technology. The study concluded that SALW proliferation resulted not only from porous borders but also from a combination of factors that vary between Mbo and Ikom LGAs.*
Key contribution to knowledge: *The study established the need for enhanced inter-agency collaboration to achieve border security and control SALW proliferation.*
Recommendation: *This study recommends permanent intelligence-sharing mechanisms, joint patrols, improved maritime and land surveillance, community-based intelligence, improved logistics and communication, and accountability to enhance border security and control SALW proliferation.*

Section 1: Introduction

Border security is a contemporary national and international security issue because it involves managing and controlling people, goods, arms, and other activities at borders. Increased informal trafficking of small arms and light weapons presents a governance challenge beyond national capacity to control and manage arms trafficking. Illicit actors are

taking advantage of weak security, poor resources, and lack of coordination to facilitate unofficial channels of arms trafficking between conflict zones and international arms markets. Arms are a key element that facilitates, promotes, and exacerbates existing conflicts and organized criminal activities such as kidnapping, armed robbery, communal clashes, and other forms of violence. The control of points of crossing is a physical manifestation of border security that requires enhanced intelligence, stockpile management, inter-agency and international coordination to prevent SALW diversion, and unauthorized use (United Nations, 2024).

Weak border security and its international implications have been a security concern in the global system as demonstrated by the case of Sudan. The conflict between Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) continues to facilitate arms trafficking in the country despite the UN arms embargo on Darfur. Over 1900 weapons shipment records were revealed by the research. Weapons and ammunitions that have recently been produced or transferred to Sudan from international arms markets also come from several countries including China, Russia, Serbia, Türkiye, the UAE, and Yemen (Amnesty International, 2024). In addition to the countries mentioned above, several other nations have supplied weapons for use in the conflict. In addition to weapons, illicit trafficking of arms not officially intended for military use has also intensified in Sudan. Weapons trafficking in Sudan is an illustration of weak formal and informal oversight and control of weapons that affect international arms-control agreements. At the same time, it demonstrates how international weapons trafficking can intersect with local conflicts to promote regional instability through spill-over effects. In addition, weak border security allows for the establishment of illicit trafficking routes that facilitate proliferation of SALW that compromises conflict management and prevention.

The African continent is not an exception to the weakness of border security and associated informal trafficking of arms especially in conflict and economic zones. The tri-junction of Nigeria, Niger, and Burkina Faso is an example of how organized crime facilitates unofficial trafficking of illicit arms especially SALW through commercial, migratory, and community networks. The region hosts a confluence of informal networks that promote proliferation of illicit arms including SALW. Several factors contribute to the high proliferation of SALW in the region including demand from warring factions, unofficial networks, and weak law enforcement to monitor and control trafficking (Alusala, 2023). It is important to note that border security is not limited to key entry points and as such, there is a need to strengthen surveillance and interdiction in remote areas.

Another example of weak border security is evident in the case of Cameroon. Weapons and ammunitions have been constantly trafficked in Northern Cameroon, especially after the emergence of Boko Haram. Weapons have been smuggled through unofficial routes including commercial, migratory, and livestock routes from Nigeria, Chad, and the Central African Republic. Over 3000 weapons and other military equipment have been intercepted and destroyed by the Cameroonian Defence Forces between 2014 and 2024 (Delanga, 2024). Similar to Sudan, insecurity and conflicts in Northern Cameroon create demand for weapons and as such increase unofficial trafficking routes that affect regional security especially Nigeria.

Weapons and small arms have become a menace in Nigeria as they are used by different violent actors for various purposes including terrorism, communal clashes, and kidnapping. Armed violence in Nigeria has been triggered by weapons that are officially produced in the

country or acquired illegally. Various groups and individuals have created demand for small arms in Nigeria. In addition to terrorism and communal clashes, kidnapping and organized crime have created demand for illicit firearms. Weakness in Nigeria's border security creates opportunities for trafficking firearms in and out of the nation's borders. At the same time, illicit firearms fuel existing security challenges and empower terrorist groups and criminal networks (Ojewale & Osasona, 2024). It is of utmost importance that Nigeria strengthens collaboration and coordination between immigration, custom, police, and other law enforcement agencies to enhance national security and control unofficial trafficking of firearms. Given the informal networks, international trafficking routes, and multiple agencies involved in firearms proliferation, it is important to strengthen inter-agency collaboration at local, national, and international levels to control the spread of illicit firearms in Nigeria.

The issue of border security and proliferation of illicit firearms has been widely documented in Nigeria and globally with regard to border security and illicit firearms proliferation. However, most of the literature on this issue in Nigeria relates to northern Nigeria including the Nigeria-Cameroon border and the violence and insecurity emanating from this region. There is an emerging view that the porous borders in Nigeria contribute to terrorism, banditry, and organized crime in general and the North West and North East in particular. Nigeria's North East, North West, and parts of the North Central regions have been severely affected by terrorism, banditry, and farmer-herder clashes respectively. However, there is limited information on security challenges affecting Nigeria's southern borders. It is worth noting that Nigeria's southern borders also facilitate weapons trafficking and proliferation of SALW in the South South region specifically in relation to the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon. Available information indicates that Nigeria is a major supplier of weapons to the Anglophone separatists in Cameroon. As such, Nigeria's southern borders contribute to SALW proliferation in the region (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime & Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 2024).

In Nigeria's South South region, one of the states that contribute to the proliferation of SALW in the region is Cross River State. The state has both formal and informal international routes that facilitate unofficial trafficking of arms between Nigeria and Cameroon. In particular, the Mfum route in Ikom LGA has been identified as a route for trafficking firearms. Immigration authorities in Nigeria have arrested suspected arms peddlers at the Mfum checkpoint in 2022 (Nigeria Immigration Service, 2022). Similarly, the weakness in security along the border in Etung LGA has resulted in proliferation of SALW in the local communities and subsequent land-related violence and other associated crimes (Sunday & Piate, 2024). The Federal Government's decision to collaborate with Cross River State to address illegal importation and proliferation of SALW through the Nigeria-Cameroon border also indicates the significance of the state to national security (Abang, 2024). Another state in South South that plays a role in unofficial trafficking of firearms is Akwa Ibom State. Although Bakassi does not share a land border with Cameroon, the proximity of this region to the capital of Cameroon and the presence of rivers and waterways facilitate illicit firearms proliferation and trafficking. Domestic and international transportation networks converge in Akwa Ibom thereby creating opportunities for weapons trafficking. Cross River and Akwa Ibom, Rivers States are connected with respect to gun trafficking. The existence of a route from Cross River through Akwa Ibom to Rivers State has been established by security agencies. With respect to illicit firearms

trafficking, the state is important as weapons from suspected gunsellers in the Niger Delta are sold to buyers in Cross River and other parts of Nigeria. Although weapons are trafficked from Nigeria's North East to Cameroonian North West, there is limited information on the extent to which specific groups in Nigeria are involved in weapons trafficking. Some of the weapons confiscated from suspected criminals in the South-South region of Nigeria came from the conflict zones in Cameroonian North West (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime & ACLED, 2024).

A major research gap in the literature on illicit firearms proliferation in Nigeria is the comparison of the situation in Cross River and Akwa Ibom states. Most of the published literature on illicit firearms proliferation in Nigeria focus on northern Nigeria in general and the Nigeria-Cameroon border in particular and the conflict and insecurity emanating from these areas. In addition, most of the published literature on this issue focus on Cross River State and not the South South region. As such, this study will contribute to knowledge by providing information on illicit firearms proliferation along Nigeria's southern borders with Cameroon and the resulting security challenges in the South South region. In particular, the study will focus on the Mbo Local Government Area (LGA) in Cross River State and Bakassi region in Akwa Ibom State. The research will examine the relationship between elements of border security, namely, surveillance, logistics, personnel/coordination, intelligence, and control of formal and informal routes and the proliferation of SALW in the South South region of Nigeria.

1.2 Statement of the Research Problems

The proliferation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons pose a serious security challenge to Nigeria as they facilitate kidnapping, communal clashes, piracy, robbery, militancy, and other low-intensity conflicts. Previous studies have demonstrated the association between porous borders, arms trafficking, and regional security cooperation in Nigeria and the proliferation of SALW. However, there is limited information on the collaboration between agencies and the role of inter-agency coordination in addressing illicit trafficking of firearms at the Nigeria-Cameroon borders, particularly in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. This study focuses on inter-agency collaboration and control of illicit firearms trafficking in the study area.

The security situation in Bakassi LGA of Akwa Ibom State poses a huge challenge to the State's security considering the vast maritime jurisdiction it covers in the Gulf of Guinea. Apart from the potential security challenges the coastal and water communities will face, the waterways, fisheries, and water transport provide a breeding ground for smuggling activities which requires inter-agency collaboration for effective control. The Nigerian Navy, Police, Customs, Immigration, Security, and Intelligence agencies must collaborate closely to share information, carry out joint surveillance, and enforce the law in the coastal and border communities. Weak inter-agency collaboration in information sharing and patrol operations will affect the security of the State's borders and protect the coastal communities from small arms proliferation, piracy, and other associated crimes. In addition to insecurity, the weakness in border security and surveillance in coastal and water communities will affect local indigenes, traders, and transporters.

On the other hand, the security situation in Cross River State is also a challenge considering the proximity to Cameroon and the proliferation of arms across the borders. Ikom Local Government faces many security challenges brought about by insecure and porous borders that facilitate incessant cross-border crimes including small arms trafficking.

Previous studies have shown that there are about 1-3 million illicit small arms in Nigeria indicating the extent of the problem in Cross River State (Alimba, 2017; Adamu et al., 2018). Weak inter-agency collaboration in patrol operations, intelligence, and law enforcement will affect the ability to collaborate with other agencies in controlling small arms proliferation and insecurity along the borders. In addition to insecurity, the weakness in patrol operations poses a risk to the lives and properties of Ikom residents, traders, and transporters and affects other essential economic activities.

Overall, this study will establish the conceptual link between inter-agency collaboration and border security management in local government areas facing significant risks of cross-border crimes and small arms proliferation. The study will demonstrate how inter-agency collaboration can enhance border security management and control of small arms proliferation in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States.

1.3 Research Questions

The study will answer the following questions:

i. What is the nature and causes of SALW proliferation associated with border security challenges in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States from 2010 to 2023?

ii. What are the effects of SALW proliferation and border security challenges on security and communities in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States from 2010 to 2023?

iii. What are the challenges associated with border security and control of SALW proliferation in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States from 2010 to 2023?

iv. What strategies can be employed to enhance border security and reduce SALW proliferation in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States?

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to examine border security challenges and the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States from 2010 to 2023. The specific objectives are to:

i. Examine the nature and causes of SALW proliferation arising from border security challenges in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States from 2010 to 2023.

ii. Assess the effects of SALW proliferation and border security challenges on security and communities in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States from 2010 to 2023.

iii. Identify the challenges associated with border security and control of SALW proliferation in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States from 2010 to 2023.

iv. Examine strategies for improving border security and reducing SALW proliferation in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States.

1.5 Assumptions of the Study

i. Lack of political will reduces border security and SALW control.

1.6 Conceptual Clarifications

The following concepts will be used:

1.6.1 Arms Proliferation

Arms proliferation entails increased availability, transfer, and accumulation of weapons beyond official control. In Nigeria, illicit arms proliferation through informal and formal channels poses a serious security challenge as weapons fuel kidnapping, communal clashes, militancy, and other forms of organized violence. Alimba (2017) explains that the proliferation of SALW in Nigeria

occurs through weak control mechanisms, porous borders, and demand by non-state violent actors for weapons. Adamu et al. (2018) associates the availability of small arms with threats to human security. As such, this study views arms proliferation as a phenomenon that goes beyond just increased availability and encompasses illegal procurement, transportation, and circulation of SALW.

1.6.2 Border Security

Border security involves processes and procedures that are undertaken to monitor and control movements at a country's borders to prevent activities that could compromise national security. In Nigeria, border security entails the combined efforts of several agencies responsible for immigration control, customs duties, surveillance, intelligence, and prevention of transnational crimes. Akinyemi (2019) explains that Nigeria's porous borders pose a huge security challenge that facilitates cross-border crimes and undermines national security. Onuoha (2011) associates weakness in border security with increased smuggling of illicit weapons and other security challenges. This study adopts the view that border security is about the ability of Nigeria's security agencies to collaborate and control illegal movement of SALW in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States.

1.6.3 Interagency Collaboration

Interagency collaboration involves working together through combined efforts, resources, and information-sharing for effective law enforcement. Some studies demonstrate that interagency collaboration plays a vital role in enhancing border security. Weak coordination, communication, resources, and rivalry between agencies undermine border security (Dogi et al., 2025; Asongo & Shagari, 2026). This study will examine inter-agency collaboration in controlling illicit firearms trafficking in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States.

Section 2: Literature Review

Border Security Challenges and Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Nigeria

According to Malami, Abdullah and Yusoff (2021), proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Nigeria is associated with porous borders, personnel inadequacy, equipment deficits, weak enforcement, poor data management, inappropriate stockpile management and local arms production, with corruption cutting across these weaknesses. Their study is important as it goes beyond addressing availability of weapons but identifies institutional shortcomings that allow illicit weapons to be introduced and proliferate in Nigeria. However, the emphasis on corruption as the key challenge could potentially overshadow the interplay of geographical, trafficking and operational factors in enabling proliferation. It also offers a national explanation, making it difficult to identify how challenges manifest across particular border communities. This limitation is important as border vulnerabilities are not uniform across Nigeria. environments. Waziri (2023) has examined cross-border illegal transfer of SALW in Nigeria through documentary evidence, highlighting porous borders, ineffective security measures, corruption among government and security officials, and adverse economic conditions. Waziri's analysis is significant as it directly links border porosity to illegal international movement of firearms, illustrating that SALW proliferation is not exclusively a domestic security problem. The study, in turn, indicates that weapons flow more easily where border controls are unable to effectively regulate people, goods, and routes crossing national boundaries. However, the fact that the study takes a documentary approach limits its relevance in capturing the experiences of border officials, community leaders, traders, and residents who face these challenges. More

importantly, since the analysis takes Nigeria broadly, it does not adequately distinguish between types of border environments, or explain how agencies coordinate their responses to trafficking.

In Odey, Bassey, Ikhwan and Santyaningtyas (2022), SALW smuggling was linked to the security challenges of Boko Haram along the Benin-Nigeria border. The study highlights porous borders and weak governmental responses as key conditions facilitating arms smuggling, arguing in favor of enhanced cooperation between security agencies and residents. Its relevance to the present research lies in its recognition of the fact that border security cannot be realized by government enforcement alone, as residents around border areas possess valuable knowledge of movements, routes, and suspicious activities. However, the study's emphasis on the Benin-Nigeria border and Boko Haram limits its capacity to explain the different security dynamics of the Nigeria-Cameroon border and the maritime environment of Akwa Ibom. According to Oguche (2026), the relationship between border porosity, SALW proliferation and insecurity is particularly evident in Cross River State, where the prolonged Anglophone conflict in Cameroon has increased cross-border movements, exposing weaknesses in regulating the Nigeria-Cameroon border. Through a mixed methods approach, including 399 respondents and 10 key informant interviews across two LGAs, Oguche demonstrates that poorly regulated borders can facilitate both population movements and the transnational circulation of SALW. The study is particularly significant in the present research as it provides geographically relevant evidence from Cross River State rather than relying on national-level analysis. However, since the study was published after the 2010–2023 period examined by the present research, it cannot be treated as direct evidence of conditions throughout the study period.

Similarly, Amali and Buthelezi (2025) argue that the proliferation of SALW in Nigeria should not be explained by porous borders, as supply and demand factors interact to shape the circulation of illicit weapons. Their study identifies adverse socioeconomic and political conditions as important drivers of demand, while weak border management facilitates the supply and movement of firearms into Nigeria. This represents an important development in the literature, as it challenges explanations that treat border porosity as a sufficient explanation for SALW proliferation. The study's strength lies in linking structural conditions that create demand with institutional weaknesses that facilitate supply. However, its national-level focus leaves little room for examining how these factors manifest across particular border communities and how security institutions respond operationally to trafficking.

According to Asangausung, Okorie, Mboho and Igbudu (2025), border security challenges in Mbo, Akwa Ibom State, were intimately linked to border porosity, inadequacy of personnel, weak intelligence networks, insufficient funding and lack of community cooperation. Their study revealed that the inhospitable border environment created conducive conditions for smuggling and other illicit activities, which placed an immense burden on the capacity of the Nigeria Customs Service to regulate movements across the border. Indeed, the authors identified intelligence gathering, surveillance, community relations, technology and interagency collaboration as key strategies for enhancing border control. Their study therefore illustrated that effective border management in southern Nigeria went beyond physical patrols and checkpoints, as cooperation among security agencies and border communities was paramount in garnering timely information and countering emerging threats. However, the study focused on commodity smuggling rather than the

proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons. In addition, the Nigeria Customs Service was examined as opposed to the entire network of agencies involved in border security, including the Police, Immigration, Navy, NSCDC and intelligence services. Indeed, the study failed to adequately explain how interagency intelligence sharing, surveillance and operational coordination affected SALW control. This gap created an important void for the present study, as Mbo has a complex maritime and riverine border environment that necessitates coordinated responses from several security institutions. The present study therefore extended the southern Nigerian border literature by examining SALW proliferation as well as the practical functioning of interagency collaboration in Mbo and Ikom. This focus enabled a better understanding of how geographical vulnerabilities, institutional capacity and interagency coordination interacted in managing border security and controlling illicit arms movement.

In the Nigerian literature reviewed, a clear pattern emerges that SALW proliferation is associated with porous borders, corruption, weak enforcement, socioeconomic pressures, criminal networks, and limited institutional capacity. However, the literature remains fragmented in three respects. First, many studies examine northern Nigeria or broad national patterns, leaving the southern border environment comparatively underexplored. Second, studies that identify interagency or community cooperation often recommend it without adequately examining how intelligence sharing, joint surveillance and operational coordination function in practice. The study therefore extends existing Nigerian scholarship from a predominantly border-porosity explanation toward an institutional and interagency explanation of SALW proliferation.

Section 3: Materials and Methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach and phenomenological research design to examine border security challenges and the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. The study was conducted in Mbo Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, and Ikom Local Government Area, Cross River State, because of their relevance to border security and arms movement. Mbo and Ikom LGAs were selected for their relevance to border security and arms movement, while participants were chosen based on knowledge, experience, and direct involvement in border security issues. The study population comprised security personnel, border officials, community leaders, traditional rulers, and other stakeholders with relevant knowledge. A sample frame of 15 Key Informant Interview (KII) participants was scientifically determined through purposive selection and data saturation. In contrast, two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), comprising 6 to 12 participants per session, were conducted. Purposive sampling, a non-probability technique, was employed to select participants based on their knowledge, experience, and direct involvement in border security issues. Interview transcripts were coded systematically, with themes developed from recurring patterns and aligned with the research questions. Limitations included reliance on participant perceptions, the small sample size, and restriction to two LGAs. Data were collected through KIIs, FGDs, and documentary sources and analysed thematically through coding, categorisation, and interpretation. Triangulation enhanced the credibility of the findings.

Table for Data Sources:

Source Type	Examples	Number of Sources	Contribution to Analysis
Key Informant Interviews	Security personnel, border officials, community leaders, traditional rulers	15	Qualitative data on border security challenges, SALW proliferation, and interagency collaboration
Focus Group Discussions	Community members from Mbo and Ikom LGAs	2	Community perspectives on security effects, informal routes, and local knowledge
Documentary sources	Government reports, UNODC reports, academic literature	10+	Provided institutional context and empirical data on SALW proliferation

Section 4: Theoretical Framework

The study will be guided by Queer Ladder Theory (QLT), which was initially developed by Daniel Bell and later embraced by Lyman (2007) and Mallory (2007). The theory views organized crime as a means of achieving wealth, power, and status, especially when opportunities and institutional controls are limited. QLT will be useful in this study to demonstrate how weaknesses in border security contribute to illicit firearms proliferation. While previous studies have demonstrated the application of QLT in examining kidnapping, banditry, and oil crimes, this study will focus on inter-agency collaboration and border security. As such, the study will demonstrate how lack of collaboration between agencies facilitates firearms proliferation and insecurity in the study area. This study contributes to Queer Ladder Theory by demonstrating that the pursuit of wealth, power and status through criminal activities is shaped not only by socioeconomic motivations but also by institutional opportunities created by weak border governance. It further extends the theory by showing how effective interagency collaboration can reduce these opportunities and strengthen the control of SALW proliferation. However, Queer Ladder Theory has limitations because its emphasis on individual socioeconomic motivations may understate broader structural and institutional factors that facilitate organised crime. The present study addresses this limitation by extending the theory to examine institutional weaknesses, poor border governance, and inadequate interagency collaboration as conditions that enable SALW proliferation and insecurity. The present study addresses this limitation by extending the theory to examine institutional weaknesses, poor border governance, and inadequate interagency collaboration as conditions that enable SALW proliferation and insecurity.

Section 5: Results and Presentation of Data

The data analysis focussed on the four objectives of the study: nature and causes of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation, its effects on security and communities, challenges affecting border security and SALW control, and strategies for improving border security and reducing SALW proliferation. Evidence from Key Informant

Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted in Mbo Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, and Ikom Local Government Area, Cross River State, was thematically analysed and triangulated with relevant Nigerian empirical literature and documentary evidence.

Objective 1: Nature and Causes of SALW Proliferation Arising from Border Security Challenges in Mbo and Ikom LGAs of Akwa Ibom and Cross River States

The KII findings revealed that SALW proliferation in Mbo and Ikom was associated with informal routes, surveillance difficulties, weak enforcement and criminal networks. Respondents indicated that the physical presence of security agencies was not a guarantee for effective border control. Mbo's maritime environment created surveillance challenges, while Ikom's border location presented additional difficulties because of informal crossing routes.

A KII respondent from Mbo LGA indicated that the principal problem was not the absence of security personnel but the difficulty of maintaining continuous surveillance across routes. As KII respondent Hon Udo Ibanga, LGA Chairman, Mbo LGA, interviewed on 05 February 2024 at 10:30 am, said: 'The problem is not that there are no security agencies. The problem is that the agencies cannot cover every route continuously. Where surveillance is weak, people can use alternative routes to move prohibited items.'

His observation corroborated the findings of Tonwe and Okoro (2018), who revealed that failure by law-enforcement agencies to control the movement of SALW across Nigeria's borders effectively contributes to insecurity. Their study recommended a comprehensive cooperative strategy that involved relevant security institutions and neighbouring countries. Similarly, Odey et al. (2022), in their study of the Nigeria-Benin border, demonstrated that porous borders facilitate SALW smuggling and proposed strong coordination between security agencies and border communities.

The findings from Ikom showed that local knowledge was vital in understanding border vulnerabilities. HRM Etinyin Etim Okon Edet, Traditional Ruler, Abana Community, Ikom LGA, interviewed on 16 January 2024 at 12:00 pm, stated that: 'communities possess knowledge of local routes and movements that may not always be available to formal security institutions'. This finding suggested that effective border management would require the engagement of traditional and community institutions as sources of local knowledge.

The FGD findings also indicated that community members had considerable knowledge of waterways, bush paths and informal crossing points that security personnel could not monitor continuously. FGD respondents from Ikom LGA collectively stated that: 'There are places that security personnel cannot reach regularly. People who know the terrain can move through these routes without passing through the official checkpoints.'

This finding is particularly pertinent to Ikom LGA given that the border environment was not restricted to formal crossing points. Odey et al. (2022) similarly demonstrated that weaknesses associated with porous borders could facilitate the movement of illicit arms and other transnational criminal activities. Their study further stressed the need for coordination between security agencies and residents in addressing cross-border SALW trafficking.

The evidence did not support the notion that every informal route was an arms-trafficking route. Rather, such routes created opportunities that criminal actors could exploit if surveillance and enforcement were

inadequate. This nuance was crucial given that SALW proliferation also depended on demand. The Nigerian literature suggested that socioeconomic pressures, criminal incentives and insecurity could increase the demand for illicit weapons, while weak border controls facilitated their supply.

Malami, Abdullah and Yusoff (2021) further corroborated this finding by identifying border porosity, inadequate personnel, insufficient equipment and weak enforcement, poor data management, stockpile problems and corruption as interconnected issues that impeded the control of SALW proliferation in Nigeria. Their analysis was important because it demonstrated that physical border vulnerability became severe where institutional capacities and enforcement integrity were weak.

The study therefore demonstrated that SALW proliferation in Mbo and Ikom LGAs arose from an intersection between physical border vulnerabilities and institutional weaknesses: it challenged simplistic interpretations that attributed arms trafficking solely to porous borders. Rather, criminal demand, economic incentives and limited enforcement opportunities jointly created an environment in which illicit arms could circulate.

Objective 2: Effects of SALW Proliferation on Security and Communities in Mbo and Ikom LGAs of Akwa Ibom and Cross River States

The second objective sought to examine the effects of SALW proliferation on security and communities. KII respondents identified illicit firearms as a catalyst for kidnapping, armed robbery, communal violence, cult-related violence and other forms of criminality. Respondents further indicated that firearms increased the capacity of criminal actors to cause casualties, intimidate communities and resist security intervention. A KII respondent, Mr Solomon Etim, Youth Leader, Mbo LGA, interviewed on 10 February 2024 at 11:00 am, stated that: 'When criminals have access to firearms, ordinary disputes can become more dangerous. The presence of weapons gives criminal groups greater capacity to threaten communities and resist security operations.'

This finding corroborated the observations of Aja (2023), who examined the proliferation of SALW and human security challenges in Nigeria and linked illicit arms to armed conflict, organised crime, terrorism, displacement and broader threats to human security. The study emphasised that the accessibility and destructive capacity of SALW made them particularly attractive to violent and organised criminal groups.

Similarly, Nigerian research on cross-border SALW movement demonstrated that ineffective border controls and illicit arms trafficking could increase the capacity of violent groups to conduct criminal and violent activities. Odey et al. (2022) revealed that porous borders facilitated SALW smuggling and created security challenges for Nigeria. FGD participants from Mbo LGA, Akwa Ibom, provided a community-centred interpretation of the effects. They underscored fear, restricted movement, disruption of economic activities and loss of confidence in security institutions. The respondents stated that: 'People in our area become afraid when they hear that guns are moving around the community. Traders, farmers and other residents may reduce their activities because they do not know who is carrying weapons or where the next incident may occur.'

This position was consistent with the broader Nigerian literature, which demonstrated that SALW proliferation extended beyond the immediate occurrence of armed attacks to affect human security, livelihoods and community development. Aja (2023), for example, argued that the proliferation of SALW undermined peace,

security and development by contributing to armed conflict, organised crime, terrorism and population displacement.

The findings nevertheless required qualification: firearms did not, on their own, generate every violent incident, but increased the destructive capacity of conflicts and criminal activities that were already driven by poverty, political grievances, competition over resources, criminal opportunity and weak social control. Rather, SALW could be understood as an important enabling factor and force multiplier rather than as the sole cause of insecurity.

The study therefore regarded SALW as a force multiplier of insecurity in Mbo and Ikom LGAs. Its principal effect was to increase the lethality, persistence and organisational capacity of criminal and violent activities rather than as a sole cause of insecurity.

Objective 3: Challenges Affecting Effective Border Security and Control of SALW in Mbo and Ikom LGAs of Akwa Ibom and Cross River States

The third objective revealed that interagency collaboration was a major issue that affected effective border security and SALW control. KII respondents identified inadequate intelligence sharing, weak communication, overlapping responsibilities, insufficient logistics, limited personnel and inadequate surveillance technology as recurring institutional problems. These challenges diminished agencies' ability to develop a common operational picture and respond rapidly to illicit arms movement.

Hon. Adesua Akpan, LGA Chairman, Ikom LGA, interviewed at Ikom LGA Headquarters on 13 January 2024 at 10:00 am, highlighted the difficulty of effectively monitoring a border environment where movements and routes extended beyond formal control points. Her perspective underscored the need for institutional coordination and community-level support in strengthening border governance.

A security respondent, Effiong Essien, Border Security Personnel, Border Post, Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), Border Command, Ikom Axis, Ikom LGA, Cross River State, interviewed on 20 January 2024 at 09:30 am, further identified that: 'Different agencies have different information, but the challenge is bringing the information together quickly enough for joint action. When information is kept within one agency, the response may come too late.'

This finding was critical given that SALW control required the involvement of multiple institutions whose responsibilities overlapped at different stages of border management. When intelligence was not shared promptly, security agencies' ability to identify suspicious movements, track trafficking networks and intervene promptly may be weakened.

The community perspective further revealed that interagency effectiveness depended partly on the quality of relationships between security agencies and border residents. HRM Etinyin Etim Okon Edet, Traditional Ruler, Abana Community, Ikom LGA, interviewed on 16 January 2024 at 12:00 pm, pointed out the value of community knowledge and local participation in identifying suspicious movements. An FGD participant similarly observed that: 'The community can provide information because we know the environment, but people need confidence that security agencies will protect them and act on what they report.'

This finding corroborated the observations of Odey et al. (2022), who recommended greater coordination between security services and residents as part of the response to cross-border SALW proliferation. Their findings were particularly relevant given that two of the study's authors were affiliated with the University of Calabar, Cross River State,

which provided a useful Nigerian and regional perspective on border-related SALW challenges.

The evidence therefore suggested that the major institutional problem was not the total absence of security agencies but limited integration of their capabilities. Nigeria's border-security system involved multiple institutions with different statutory responsibilities. When intelligence remained within institutional silos, operational responsibilities overlapped or communication was delayed, criminal actors could exploit the resulting gaps.

The findings further indicated that interagency collaboration should not be interpreted solely as cooperation between formal security agencies. Effective border management required interaction amongst security institutions, local government authorities, traditional institutions, youth organisations, traders and other community stakeholders. The experiences reported by the Ikom respondents revealed that local actors could complement formal surveillance by providing contextual information about routes, movements and unusual activities.

Objective 4: Strategies for Improving Border Security and Reducing SALW Proliferation in Mbo and Ikom LGAs of Akwa Ibom and Cross River States

The fourth objective sought to examine strategies to improve border security and reduce SALW proliferation. KII respondents advocated integrated surveillance, regular joint patrols, intelligence fusion, improved communication systems, adequate logistics, technological surveillance and clear institutional responsibilities. They further advised enhanced monitoring of waterways and informal routes in areas where conventional checkpoints could not provide comprehensive coverage. A KII respondent, Mr Obot Akpan, Trans-border Merchant, Mbo Waterfront, interviewed on 15 February 2024 at 11:30 am, stated that: 'The agencies need to operate together more regularly. Joint patrols and intelligence sharing should become routine rather than only after a serious incident occurs.'

The respondent's position was important given that trans-border merchants interacted directly with border environments and may observe movement patterns that formal security structures did not readily capture. However, authorities should verify community-based information before taking operational action.

This finding corroborated the recommendations of Tonwe and Okoro (2018), who advocated for a comprehensive cooperative strategy to address border porosity and SALW-related insecurity. Their study highlighted that law-enforcement agencies' failure to control illicit SALW flows effectively required a coordinated response involving relevant institutions and neighbouring states.

Odey et al. (2022) similarly recommended greater coordination between security services and border residents and suggested enhanced regional security cooperation to regulate borders and control SALW-related criminal activities.

FGD participants placed particular emphasis on community participation and protection of informants: 'If security agencies work with the community and protect people who provide information, suspicious movements can be identified earlier.'

This finding was crucial given that border communities had local knowledge that technology could not easily replicate. Community participation could complement formal surveillance if security institutions established credible mechanisms to protect informants, verify information and respond appropriately to community reports.

Technological surveillance should therefore supplement, rather than replace, human intelligence. Improved communication systems, intelligence databases, surveillance equipment and monitoring of waterways could enhance detection capacity. In contrast, community-based intelligence could provide information about movement and routes that formal surveillance might not capture. This integrated approach was particularly important in Mbo because of its maritime and riverine environment and Ikom because of its border environment and informal crossing routes.

The findings further identified the importance of institutional integrity. Malami et al. (2021) identified corruption as a major challenge to SALW control. They argued that legal and institutional mechanisms could not achieve their objectives if enforcement personnel facilitated or tolerated illicit arms movement. Consequently, improved border security should include greater accountability mechanisms, personnel training, equipment provision and effective supervision alongside physical surveillance.

The findings could also be interpreted through Queer Ladder Theory. The theory accounted for criminal activity partly as an alternative means through which individuals and networks pursued wealth, status and power where legitimate opportunities were limited. In Mbo and Ikom, weak surveillance, difficult terrain, fragmented institutional response, and limited enforcement could diminish the perceived risks associated with illicit arms trafficking. At the same time, economic incentives and established criminal networks could increase the attractiveness of participating in illegal arms movement. The present study therefore extended the theory by demonstrating that the opportunity structure for criminal advancement was influenced not only by individual socioeconomic conditions but also by institutional weaknesses in border governance.

Findings across the four objectives demonstrated that SALW proliferation in Mbo and Ikom was a multidimensional border-security problem. The KII and FGD evidence converge on informal routes. The study therefore challenged the simplistic view that porous borders alone explained SALW proliferation. Instead, arms circulation sustained the interaction between border vulnerabilities, criminal demand, socioeconomic conditions and institutional weaknesses. The principal finding was that effective SALW control required an integrated border-security architecture in which relevant agencies shared intelligence, conducted joint surveillance and operations, communicated through reliable systems, deployed appropriate technology and systematically engaged border communities. Strengthening interagency collaboration would reduce institutional gaps that criminal actors could exploit and improve the state's capacity to detect, prevent, and control illicit SALW movement in Mbo and Ikom LGAs.

The results were presented and analysed according to the four research objectives, namely the nature and causes of SALW proliferation, its effects on security and border communities, challenges affecting border security and SALW control, and strategies for improving border security and reducing SALW proliferation. Findings from the KIIs and FGDs were presented under each objective and supported with relevant empirical literature and documentary evidence. Direct quotations were used to illustrate participants' experiences and perceptions, while respondent identities were protected through appropriate attribution. The analysis was conducted thematically through coding, categorisation and interpretation, with evidence from different sources triangulated to enhance the credibility and consistency of the findings. The results showed that SALW proliferation was associated with informal routes, surveillance difficulties, weak enforcement, criminal

networks and institutional weaknesses. The findings further demonstrated that firearms increased the capacity of criminal actors to sustain violent activities and negatively affected community security and livelihoods. Major institutional challenges included inadequate intelligence sharing, weak communication, overlapping responsibilities, insufficient logistics, limited personnel and inadequate surveillance technology. The study also found that effective responses required integrated surveillance, regular joint patrols, intelligence fusion, improved communication, appropriate technology, community participation and stronger institutional accountability. Overall, the findings demonstrated that SALW proliferation was not explained by border porosity alone but by the interaction between physical vulnerabilities, criminal incentives and institutional weaknesses.

Section 6: Discussion of Findings

The first major finding, corresponding to the first objective, was that SALW proliferation in Mbo LGA, Akwa Ibom State, and Ikom LGA, Cross River State, was attributed to informal routes, difficult terrain, inadequate surveillance, weak enforcement and illicit economic activities. The findings showed that Mbo's maritime environment created unique surveillance challenges, whereas Ikom's border environment presented more challenges relating to land-based movements and informal routes. As such, both states had border-security vulnerabilities, but they presented differently in space. This was in line with Tonwe and Okoro (2018) and Odey et al. (2022), who associated porous borders with SALW trafficking. However, the current study expanded on their assertion by asserting that local geographical conditions shaped the specific form of border vulnerability.

The second finding, associated with the second objective, was that SALW proliferation was a force multiplier of insecurity in both LGAs. SALW proliferation increased criminal actors' capacity to cause disputes escalation, intimidate residents and resist security intervention. However, the effects varied contextually. In Mbo LGA, insecurity would threaten waterfront activities, trans-border commerce and livelihoods, whereas in Ikom, it could restrict farming, movement and legitimate cross-border interaction. This was consistent with Aja (2023), who related SALW proliferation to broader human-security threats in Nigeria. The current study, however, went beyond the national scope by stating that the security and livelihood consequences occurred differently at the LGA level.

The third finding, associated with the third objective, was that weak interagency collaboration was a central challenge to effective SALW control. The evidence revealed inadequate intelligence sharing, delayed communication, overlapping responsibilities, limited logistics and insufficient

surveillance capacity. This finding corroborated Malami et al. (2021), but it diverged in terms of emphasis, identifying institutional fragmentation and poor interagency integration as critical mechanisms, in which border vulnerabilities were exploited as security flaws.

The fourth finding, aligned with the fourth objective, was that SALW control required integrated border governance, which involved joint operations, intelligence fusion, technological surveillance, community participation and institutional accountability. However, could the same strategy be applied identically to Mbo and Ikom? The findings suggested otherwise. Mbo required stronger maritime and waterway surveillance, whereas Ikom required more attention to land routes and community-based intelligence. Theoretically, this extended Queer Ladder Theory by stating that the criminal pursuit of

wealth and power was influenced not only by socioeconomic incentives, but by institutional opportunities, created by weak border governance.

Thus, the study's central proposition was that SALW proliferation occurred where criminal motivation intersected with institutional opportunity, thereby providing a more nuanced explanation than approaches, which were based solely on poverty, porous borders or weapon availability (Tonwe & Okoro, 2018; Malami et al., 2021; Odey et al., 2022; Aja, 2023).

1.12 Test of Assumption

Assumption One: Lack of political will weakens border security and SALW control.

The findings from Objectives One to Four affirm this assumption, as the evidence shows that informal routes, inadequate surveillance, weak enforcement and limited border control capacity create opportunities for SALW in Mbo and Ikom, whereas inadequate logistics, communication and interagency coordination hinder effective control and response. Objective One established that informal routes, weak enforcement and low capacity facilitated SALW proliferation, whereas Objective Two showed that proliferation caused increased insecurity and adversely affected livelihoods, particularly in the case of the cross-border informal market. Objective Three identified fragmented intelligence, inadequate logistics, weak communication and interagency coordination as impediments to effective border control. Objective Four then demonstrated the need for joint operations, surveillance, community participation and institutional responsibility in the control process. Combined, these findings suggest that the issue goes beyond simply the porosity of borders and that there is a need to strengthen political commitment to control measures.

This finding aligns with Waziri (2023), who found that Nigeria's responses to illicit SALW transfers remained ineffective and recommended improved political commitment, better border control and adequate resources. Likewise, Ibrahim and Abdulqadir (2025) related SALW proliferation to leadership failures and lack of political will, while Queer Ladder Theory holds that opportunities for crime arise when legitimate mechanisms and effective enforcement are lacking. Thus, the assumption is accepted as valid: inadequate political commitment can undermine institutional enforcement and create opportunities for SALW proliferation.

Section 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined border security challenges and the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Mbo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State and Ikom Local Government Area of Cross River State. The study concludes that SALW proliferation in the two study areas could not be explained solely by the porosity of borders. The findings demonstrated that the problem resulted from the interaction of difficult terrain, informal routes, weak surveillance, inadequate enforcement, illicit economic incentives, corruption and institutional fragmentation. These factors created opportunities that criminal actors could exploit for the movement and circulation of illicit firearms. The study further established that the nature of border vulnerability differed according to the local environment. Mbo LGA, with its maritime and riverine environment, faced surveillance challenges that required greater attention to waterways and coastal routes, while Ikom LGA required stronger monitoring of land routes and informal crossing points.

In relation to the first objective, the study found that SALW proliferation was associated with informal routes, inadequate surveillance,

weak enforcement and criminal networks. The findings demonstrated that informal routes should not automatically be regarded as arms-trafficking routes. Rather, they provided opportunities that could be exploited when surveillance and enforcement were inadequate. The study therefore moved beyond a simplistic explanation based solely on border porosity and showed that arms circulation was also influenced by criminal demand, socioeconomic incentives and institutional weaknesses.

In relation to the second objective, the study established that SALW proliferation increased the capacity of criminal actors to sustain kidnapping, armed robbery, communal violence, cult-related violence and other forms of insecurity. The presence of firearms increased the lethality and persistence of violent activities and contributed to fear, restricted movement, disruption of economic activities and declining confidence in security institutions. The study, however, recognised that firearms were not the sole causes of insecurity. Rather, SALW functioned as an important force multiplier that increased the capacity of existing criminal and violent activities.

In relation to the third objective, the study found that inadequate interagency collaboration constituted a major challenge to effective border security and SALW control. Inadequate intelligence sharing, weak communication, overlapping institutional responsibilities, insufficient logistics, limited personnel and inadequate surveillance technology weakened the ability of security institutions to develop a coordinated response to illicit arms movement. The findings further demonstrated that effective border security extended beyond cooperation among formal security agencies. Traditional rulers, youth organisations, traders, local authorities and other legitimate community stakeholders could provide valuable local information concerning routes, movements and suspicious activities.

In relation to the fourth objective, the study established that effective SALW control required integrated surveillance, regular joint patrols, intelligence fusion, improved communication, adequate logistics, appropriate surveillance technology, clearly defined institutional responsibilities and meaningful community participation. The study therefore concluded that interagency collaboration should be institutionalised rather than activated only after serious security incidents. Effective cooperation among relevant agencies and border communities would improve information flow, strengthen surveillance and reduce institutional gaps that criminal actors could exploit.

Theoretically, the study extended Queer Ladder Theory by demonstrating that the pursuit of wealth, status and power through criminal activities was influenced not only by socioeconomic motivations but also by institutional opportunity structures created by weaknesses in border governance. Weak surveillance, difficult terrain, fragmented institutional responses and limited enforcement could reduce the perceived risks associated with illicit arms movement. The study therefore extended the application of Queer Ladder Theory from an emphasis on criminal motivation to an understanding of how institutional weaknesses could create opportunities for criminal advancement. This theoretical extension provided a useful framework for understanding the relationship between criminal incentives, border vulnerabilities and interagency collaboration in SALW control.

The study concluded that SALW proliferation in Mbo and Ikom was a multidimensional border-security and governance problem. Effective control therefore required an integrated approach that combined coordinated intelligence, joint

operations, contextual surveillance, technological support, institutional accountability and community participation.

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Relevant security agencies should establish permanent mechanisms for intelligence sharing and joint operations in Mbo and Ikom LGAs. These mechanisms should include regular joint patrols, coordinated surveillance, timely exchange of operational information and clearly defined institutional responsibilities. Such arrangements would reduce institutional silos and improve the capacity of security agencies to respond promptly to suspected SALW movement.

2. Government and relevant security institutions should strengthen maritime and waterway surveillance in Mbo LGA because of its riverine and maritime environment. In Ikom LGA, greater attention should be given to land routes and informal crossing points. Appropriate surveillance technology, adequate personnel, communication equipment and operational logistics should be provided according to the specific security requirements of each location.

3. Security agencies should establish structured mechanisms for obtaining and verifying information from traditional rulers, youth leaders, traders, trans-border merchants and other legitimate community stakeholders. Such mechanisms should include clear procedures for reporting suspicious movements, verifying information and protecting credible informants. Community participation should complement, rather than replace, formal security surveillance.

4. Government should strengthen the capacity of border-security personnel through regular training, adequate equipment, reliable communication systems and effective supervision. Accountability mechanisms should also be strengthened to reduce corruption, prevent the diversion of security resources and discourage the illicit facilitation or circulation of SALW. Improved institutional integrity would strengthen the effectiveness of border-control measures.

Limitations of the Study

The study had some limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the qualitative design relied substantially on the experiences, perceptions, and accounts of participants, which may have been influenced by individual experiences or institutional positions. Although triangulation of KIIs, FGDs and documentary sources was used to strengthen credibility, the findings remained dependent on the availability and openness of participants.

Second, the study involved 15 Key Informant Interviews and two Focus Group Discussions and was restricted to Mbo and Ikom LGAs. Consequently, the findings could not automatically be generalised to all border communities in Akwa Ibom, Cross River State or Nigeria. The two LGAs were selected because of their relevance to the research problem, but other border locations may have different geographical, institutional and security conditions.

Third, the sensitive nature of SALW trafficking and border insecurity may have limited the extent to which some participants were willing to disclose information concerning illicit activities, security weaknesses or institutional shortcomings. Despite efforts to maintain confidentiality and triangulate information, some relevant

experiences may therefore not have been fully captured.

7.4 Suggestions for Further Research

Future studies should undertake comparative research across a wider range of Nigerian border communities to determine whether the patterns identified in Mbo and Ikom also occur in other maritime, riverine and land-border environments. Comparative studies could provide a broader understanding of how geographical differences influence SALW proliferation and border-security management.

Future research should also incorporate quantitative data, including documented SALW seizures, reported trafficking incidents, border-security operations, and other relevant indicators, to complement qualitative accounts. Such data could help establish measurable patterns in SALW movement and border-security challenges.

Further studies should examine specific interagency collaboration mechanisms and assess their effectiveness in practice. Attention could be given to intelligence-sharing arrangements, joint patrols, communication systems, surveillance technologies, and coordination between security agencies and border communities. Research could also compare areas with strong interagency collaboration with areas where coordination remains weak. Such studies would provide further evidence on the institutional conditions that enable or constrain effective SALW control and contribute to more evidence-based border-security policies.

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