Proliferation of small and light weapons in the Niger-Delta Region of Nigeria: Danger to National Security.

By

Abobo Benson Oderohwo
Department of Criminology and Security Studies.
University of Delta Agbor.
Oderohwo.benson@unidel.edu.ng
+2348038161350.

Eneche Abdul Adamu fsi, (DDG),
Department of State Security Services, (NHSS), Abuja.
abduleneche@yahoo.com
+2348033273053

Ikpen Akpojero Jomo, PhD
Department of Overseas Development Assistant,
Delta State Ministry of Economic Planning,
Asaba, Delta State.
jomoikpen@gmail.com
+2348035777415

&
Justus Chukwuka Iwegbu
Department of Sociology,
University of Delta, Agbor.
Cj4life@gmail.com
+2348036250662

Abstract

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria, despite its pivotal role in the nation's oil economy, remains plagued by chronic insecurity, underdevelopment, and environmental degradation—problems largely exacerbated by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW). This study

investigates the root causes, impacts, and responses to SALW proliferation in the region, focusing on how the unchecked circulation of firearms fuels militancy, criminality, and political violence. Using a mixed-methods research design, the study combines quantitative data from 400 respondents across four states with qualitative insights from interviews and focus group discussions. Findings reveal that political sponsorship, weak law enforcement, economic deprivation, and porous borders significantly contribute to arms trafficking. Moreover, the presence of SALW undermines peace building efforts, hampers development, and entrenches cycles of youth violence. Government-led disarmament initiatives, though impact in the short term, have largely failed to provide lasting solutions due to corruption, mismanagement, and lack of political will. The study concludes by recommending community-based disarmament strategies, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and comprehensive socioeconomic reforms as sustainable responses to arms proliferation. These findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, development actors, and conflict resolution practitioners seeking to foster peace and security in the Niger Delta and similar contexts.

Keywords: Niger Delta, small arms and light weapons (SALW), insecurity, militancy, arms proliferation, peace building, disarmament.

1.0 Introduction

The Niger Delta region, home to the majority of Nigeria's crude oil reserves, continues to suffer from chronic insecurity, environmental degradation, and underdevelopment despite its economic significance. A major source of this instability is the rampant circulation of small arms and light weapons (SALW), which has enabled the rise of armed militias, criminal syndicates, and politically sponsored thugs (Edeko, 2021; Onuoha, 2022). From the days of environmental activism in the 1990s to the post-amnesty militancy of the 2000s and recent waves of cultism and kidnapping, the prevalence of weapons in civilian hands has been a constant enabler of violence.

The terrain of the region is made up of dense forests, creeks, and riverine channels that facilitates the clandestine movement of arms, while weak state presence and

rampant corruption allow these arms to be stockpiled by non-state actors (Ajayi & Chukwuma, 2023). According to the Small Arms Survey (2022), more than 6.2 million illicit firearms are in circulation across Nigeria, with a disproportionate concentration in the oil-rich Niger Delta. These weapons empower violent actors, disrupt peace processes, and undermine efforts at development and stability.

1.1 Background/Context of the Study

The Niger Delta, which includes nine oil-producing states such as Rivers, Delta, and Bayelsa, is central to Nigeria's petroleum-based economy. Despite its vast contribution to national revenue, the region faces systemic underdevelopment, inadequate infrastructure, and high rates of poverty. Although rich in oil and gas resources, communities within the region continue to suffer from economic hardship and political exclusion (Ojakorotu& Gilbert, 2021). Ethnic minority groups in the area have persistently alleged exploitation and environmental degradation by both the federal government and multinational corporations, resulting in years of unrest and agitation for justice (Obi, 2020).

Discontent surrounding environmental neglect, poor governance, and limited access to oil wealth has catalyzed the emergence of armed resistance movements in the region. Militant organizations like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) argue that their violent campaigns are responses to systemic injustice and marginalization (Eze, 2021). These groups often rely on small arms and light weapons (SALW) to execute their operations, which range from sabotage of oil infrastructure to hostage-taking. The widespread possession of these weapons has not only strengthened militant resistance but also encouraged criminal enterprises to flourish under the cover of militancy (Ajayi&Ikuejube, 2022).

The unchecked inflow of SALW into the Niger Delta is driven by multiple factors. Weak border control, the geographical complexity of the creeks, and collusion among corrupt officials have made arms smuggling a persistent threat. Weapons are often transported through hidden maritime channels, bypassing border surveillance due to a lack of adequate technology and oversight (Onuoha, 2020). The illegal oil trade and clandestine refining operations also serve as conduits for

gunrunning, as criminals often trade crude oil for firearms, creating a self-sustaining black market in the region (Idahosa&Nwosu, 2022).

Political actors have also played a direct role in the circulation of arms within the Niger Delta. During election periods, it is common for politicians to arm local thugs to intimidate opponents and manipulate voting outcomes. These armed youths are frequently left with the weapons post-election, leading to an increase in armed robbery, kidnapping, and other violent activities (Nwankwo & Ibrahim, 2021). This practice has entrenched the use of violence as a political tool and normalized the presence of weapons in everyday disputes, undermining democratic processes (Okoli & Orinya, 2021).

The prevalence of SALW has significantly increased the incidence of violence in the region. Disputes that would typically be addressed through peaceful negotiations now escalate into armed confrontations, particularly in cases involving land, leadership succession, or community boundaries (Akpan&Ekpu, 2023). The inability of law enforcement to respond effectively has led communities to form vigilante groups for self-defense, inadvertently contributing to further arms proliferation and deteriorating security (Ukeje&Mvulirwenande, 2022).

From an economic perspective, the high level of insecurity fueled by SALW has negatively impacted investment and development. Militant attacks on pipelines and oil installations lead to reduced oil output, revenue loss, and environmental hazards due to frequent oil spills (Ikelegbe&Umukoro, 2021). Apart from the oil industry, sectors like agriculture, tourism, and small-scale enterprises have suffered setbacks, with many businesses relocating or shutting down due to the unsafe environment.

The consequences of arms proliferation are particularly damaging to the youth population. Limited employment opportunities, coupled with low access to education, push many young people toward armed groups as a means of livelihood. In many communities, owning a gun confers status and offers a sense of power and belonging, especially in the absence of state support and meaningful social programs (Ibrahim & Oloruntoba, 2021). This situation has normalized

violence among the youth, making it a cyclical challenge that is difficult to disrupt through conventional reintegration programs (Oluwaniyi, 2022).

Government-led interventions, such as the 2009 Amnesty Programme, sought to reduce violence by offering disarmament and reintegration opportunities to ex-militants. While the initiative led to a temporary drop in militant activities, its overall success has been limited by issues such as mismanagement, corruption, and the failure to address underlying grievances (Adebayo & Olayode, 2020). Many beneficiaries have reverted to violence, while new militant groups continue to emerge, pointing to the need for a more sustainable and inclusive approach.

Non-governmental organizations, international agencies, and local stakeholders have also launched various peacebuilding and development projects aimed at curbing arms proliferation. Initiatives focusing on skills acquisition, education, and community engagement have shown some promise. However, their overall effectiveness is constrained by inadequate funding, poor coordination, and lack of political will to implement comprehensive reforms (Akinbobola & Adebanjo, 2021). To achieve lasting peace, these efforts must be embedded within a broader strategy that integrates governance, justice, and sustainable development.

In summary, the easy accessibility and widespread use of small arms and light weapons in the Niger Delta are both a result of and a contributor to the region's instability. These weapons empower militant groups, facilitate criminality, and perpetuate cycles of violence, all while weakening state institutions. Combating this issue requires coordinated action from the government, civil society, and international partners, as well as a long-term commitment to resolving the structural issues that underlie the region's volatility (Ekumaoko&Okoli, 2023).

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Although several policy measures such as the Presidential Amnesty Programme and various disarmament campaigns have been implemented over the years, the challenge of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in the Niger Delta remains unresolved. Violent incidents continue to erupt across the region, frequently fueled by the widespread and often unchecked access to firearms. This situation calls into

question the root causes of arms proliferation and the real impact of the responses already in place.

A critical issue is understanding why illegal arms trafficking thrives in the region despite government-led disarmament strategies. Political patronage, socio-economic inequalities, and weak institutional frameworks may be reinforcing the persistence of SALW. These structural factors not only sustain the circulation of weapons but also complicate efforts aimed at promoting peace and security.

The continued presence of SALW poses severe risks to peace building efforts, hampers socio-economic development, and contributes to prolonged insecurity. It also undermines trust in public institutions and perpetuates a cycle of violence among disenfranchised youth. Therefore, there is a pressing need to explore how various stakeholders such as governments at all levels, civil society organizations, and international development partners who can formulate arms control mechanisms that address the unique realities of the Niger Delta region (Ibrahim & Oloruntoba, 2021).

1.4. Objectives of the Study

The overarching aim of this study is to examine the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in the Niger Delta and assess its implications for peace, security, and development. Specifically, the study seeks to:

Identify the major political, economic, and social factors that contribute to the spread of small arms and light weapons in the Niger Delta.

Examine the impact of SALW proliferation on peace building efforts, local security, and socio-economic development within affected communities.

Assess the effectiveness of governmental and non-governmental interventions including disarmament initiatives in curbing the circulation of illicit firearms.

Propose practical and sustainable strategies that can be implemented by key stakeholders to mitigate the spread and consequences of small arms and light weapons in the region.

1.5. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:
What are the key factors driving the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the Niger Delta?

How does the presence of SALW affect peace, security, and development in the region?

To what extent have government and non-governmental interventions succeeded in addressing the problem of arms proliferation?

What sustainable strategies can be adopted to mitigate the spread and impact of SALW in the Niger Delta?

1.6. Significance of the Study

This research is vital for enhancing understanding of the relationship between arms proliferation and insecurity in the Niger Delta. Its findings will benefit policymakers, security agencies, civil society groups, and development partners by providing data-driven insights and actionable recommendations. Moreover, it will contribute to scholarly discourse on arms control, conflict prevention, and regional development in Nigeria and West Africa.

Addressing the problem of SALW is a prerequisite for achieving national security, promoting good governance, and ensuring the region's full participation in Nigeria's economic transformation (Ezekiel & Omojefe, 2022). By exploring both the local and external dynamics of arms trafficking, the study also offers comparative lessons that may benefit other conflict-prone regions in Africa.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) has emerged as a critical and persistent challenge with profound implications for security, governance, and sustainable development, especially in regions marked by fragile political institutions, endemic poverty, and protracted social unrest. In Nigeria, the Niger Delta stands out as a particularly vulnerable area where SALW proliferation is deeply entrenched. This stems from a complex historical backdrop of socio-political grievances, economic marginalization, and the region's strategic importance as the epicenter of Nigeria's oil production (Ajayi & Chukwuma, 2023). The availability and misuse of SALW have been identified as key drivers escalating armed conflicts, intensifying crime waves, and severely undermining peace-building and development efforts. Contemporary scholarship has increasingly shifted focus from merely mapping the sources and supply chains of these weapons to analyzing their profound socio-political consequence show they reshape social norms, redefine local power dynamics, and weaken community resilience mechanisms (Onuoha, 2022; Edeko, 2021).

Despite extensive prior research, recent political shifts, rising economic inequalities, and faltering governance reforms necessitate a renewed critical examination of the drivers and impacts of SALW proliferation. The evolving nature of conflicts in the Niger Delta, coupled with systemic corruption and entrenched structural violence, further complicate efforts to curb the spread of illicit arms. This chapter critically engages with existing and emerging scholarship to provide a nuanced understanding of SALW proliferation's multifaceted nature, highlighting its centrality to the Niger Delta's ongoing instability and developmental stagnation (Chigbo, 2023).

2.2 Conceptual Framework

2.2.1 Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)

The proliferation of SALW is understood as the uncontrolled distribution, acquisition, and use of firearms and related weaponry, predominantly by non-state actors or unauthorized individuals. In the Niger Delta, this proliferation has been exacerbated by decades of militarized resistance movements, systemic neglect by

governmental authorities, and the activities of organized criminal networks with both local and transnational links. According to the Small Arms Survey (2022), Nigeria harbors an estimated 6.2 million illicit firearms, with the Niger Delta ranking among the regions with the highest concentrations. The influx of these weapons is facilitated by Nigeria's porous land borders and extensive maritime coastline, often with the covert endorsement of political operatives or through sophisticated smuggling networks connected to the global arms trade (Ajayi & Chukwuma, 2023).

Onuoha (2022) highlights that the demand for SALW in the Niger Delta is principally driven by a pervasive climate of insecurity and the chronic failure of state security institutions to provide effective protection. Various groups including cult organizations, militant factions, and youth gangs view arms not only as instruments of self-defense but as essential tools for asserting territorial control, securing economic advantages, and leveraging political influence. This widespread armament has precipitated a significant cultural shift, normalizing violence as the dominant mode of political engagement and social negotiation. Edeko (2021) further notes that government amnesty programs, though temporarily reducing overt militancy, failed to tackle the underlying drivers of arms circulation or dismantle the militant infrastructures fully. Consequently, many former combatants have transformed into criminal entrepreneurs, exploiting their arsenal to engage in illicit activities such as oil theft, piracy, and kidnappings, thereby perpetuating the cycle of violence and insecurity.

2.2 Intervening Variables and Structural Enablers

Understanding the dynamics of SALW proliferation in the Niger Delta requires an appreciation of the structural and institutional factors that enable and sustain the widespread possession and misuse of these weapons. These intervening variables are critical to comprehending how SALW translate into chronic insecurity and development stagnation in the region.

2.2.1 Weak Governance and Institutional Failure

The fragility and dysfunctionality of governance systems in the Niger Delta represent a principal enabler of SALW proliferation. Nigerian security agencies are

frequently under-resourced, poorly trained, and hampered by bureaucratic inefficiencies that limit their operational effectiveness. Ezekiel and Omojefe (2022) argue that inadequate law enforcement presence, especially in remote riverine and creeks areas, creates a permissive environment where arms traffickers and criminal groups operate with near impunity. In many affected communities, the vacuum created by ineffective policing has resulted in parallel security structures where armed non-state actors impose their own forms of justice, levy unofficial taxes, and manage local conflicts autonomously.

Political interference further weakens institutional effectiveness, with security operations and judicial processes often manipulated to serve partisan interests. Chigbo (2023) highlights that this systemic institutional failure engenders a legitimacy crisis whereby local populations increasingly turn to militias, vigilantes, or armed gangs perceived as more reliable protectors despite their violent methods. Such developments entrench a violent culture, erode public confidence in democratic institutions, and contribute to a self-perpetuating cycle of insecurity and state fragility.

2.2.2 Socio-Economic Deprivation

Socioeconomic conditions significantly fuel the demand and circulation of SALW in the Niger Delta. Akinola (2020) observes that the region suffers from widespread youth unemployment, limited educational attainment, and pervasive underemployment, factors that render young people vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups. These groups provide not only economic incentives but also a sense of power, identity, and community belonging that the state's neglectful policies fail to offer.

Furthermore, Oboh and Iwara (2022) emphasize that persistent economic exclusion and developmental neglect in oil-producing communities exacerbate grievances against the government and multinational corporations. When citizens perceive violence as the only effective means to demand recognition, rights, or redistribution of resources, the possession and use of arms become rationalized as necessary tools for survival and political negotiation rather than mere instruments

of last resort. This economic and social disenfranchisement thus perpetuates a vicious cycle where poverty and violence reinforce each other.

2.2.3 Political Manipulation and Elite Complicity

The instrumentalization of SALW by political elites is a critical but often under-examined driver of arms proliferation. Research by Chinedu and Adegboye (2021) documents how politicians arm youth militias and gangs, particularly during electoral periods, to intimidate opponents, disrupt electoral processes, and secure strategic victories in contested constituencies. These weapons are rarely retrieved post-elections, instead remaining in circulation and fueling post-electoral violence, organized crime, and political thuggery.

Omotola and Olorunsola (2023) note that the political elite's complicity in arms distribution fosters a culture of impunity and legitimizes violence as a political instrument. This patron-client dynamic entrenches undemocratic practices and perpetuates cycles of violence, severely undermining democratic governance and peace building in the Niger Delta.

2.2.4 Geographical and Infrastructural Challenges

The Niger Delta's unique and challenging physical environment significantly facilitates arms trafficking and militant operations. The region's dense mangrove swamps, intricate network of creeks, and difficult-to-access islands provide ideal cover and logistical routes for arms smugglers and armed groups. Onuoha (2022) underscores how these geographical features impede effective state surveillance and security enforcement, allowing illicit arms movements to thrive.

In addition to natural terrain challenges, Ojo and Akintunde (2021) highlight that poor infrastructure characterized by neglected roads, deficient communication systems, and inadequate transport facilities further restricts state presence and responsiveness. Many communities remain effectively isolated from formal governance structures, compelling them to forge security arrangements with local armed groups or criminal networks, thus reinforcing the cycle of arms dependence and insecurity.

2.3 Consequences: Threats to Peace and Development

The widespread proliferation and misuse of SALW in the Niger Delta have precipitated severe and multifaceted consequences that undermine peace, governance, and sustainable development. These outcomes form part of a broader destabilizing pattern with far-reaching implications for the region's future.

2.3.1 Escalation of Armed Conflicts

The abundance of small arms significantly escalates local and inter-communal conflicts. Disputes over land rights, chieftaincy titles, and control of oil resources frequently degenerate into violent confrontations, fueled by the ready availability of sophisticated weaponry. Ajayi and Chukwuma (2023) argue that SALW reduce the threshold for violent engagement, enabling armed factions to challenge both state authority and traditional dispute resolution mechanisms through coercion and force. This militarization of politics and identity struggles perpetuates a climate of fear and instability that undermines social cohesion.

2.3.2 Sabotage and Economic Decline

Armed militant groups equipped with SALW regularly engage in sabotage against critical oil infrastructure, including pipelines and production facilities. Such attacks cause extensive environmental damage, disrupt national revenue flows, and deter investment. Edeko (2021) emphasizes that these acts, often politically motivated, seek to leverage negotiations with both oil companies and government entities. The economic ramifications are profound, impacting federal revenue and local livelihoods dependent on oil sector activities.

Oboh and Iwara (2022) further note the long-term ecological degradation from such sabotage undermines agriculture and fisheries, exacerbating poverty and economic marginalization. This economic decline drives more youths towards criminality, perpetuating a vicious cycle where poverty and armed violence feed into each other.

2.3.3 Kidnapping and Criminal Enterprises

The arms economy in the Niger Delta has facilitated the rise of organized crime syndicates specializing in kidnapping for ransom. Akinola (2020) documents how

SALW empower criminals to conduct high-risk abductions and evade security forces. Victims span a broad spectrum, including local traders, students, and expatriates, creating a pervasive atmosphere of insecurity.

The widespread prevalence of kidnapping disrupts commercial activities, deters community engagement, and generates pervasive fear. Ransom payments are frequently recycled into purchasing more arms, thus reinforcing the operational capacities of criminal networks and sustaining a cycle of violence and economic predation (Chigbo, 2023).

2.3.4 Stifling of Development Projects

Security concerns arising from SALW proliferation directly impede the implementation of development initiatives. Both governmental and international donor-funded projects suffer interruptions, as contractors face threats, extortion, or outright violence from armed groups. Omotola and Olorunsola (2023) highlight how such disruptions delay the delivery of essential infrastructure, including roads, healthcare facilities, and schools, further marginalizing communities and undermining developmental progress.

2.3.5 Social Fragmentation and Displacement

The human toll of SALW proliferation extends beyond physical violence to encompass mass displacement, social disintegration, and widespread psychological trauma. Communities afflicted by armed conflict often experience forced migration, the erosion of traditional leadership structures, and a breakdown in social trust. Chinedu and Adegboye (2021) emphasize that displaced populations face significant barriers to accessing education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, thereby weakening their long-term resilience and perpetuating cycles of poverty and vulnerability.

2.4 Theoretical Review

The theoretical frameworks that underpin the study of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation are critical for understanding the complex interplay of social, political, economic, and security factors that sustain the cycle of violence and instability in regions such as the Niger Delta. This section reviews key theories

that provide conceptual lenses for analyzing SALW proliferation and its implications.

2.4.1 State Fragility and Security Dilemma Theory

State Fragility Theory centers on the inability of a state to provide basic security, enforce the rule of law, and deliver public goods effectively, resulting in governance vacuums that non-state actors exploit (Rotberg, 2004). In the context of the Niger Delta, the state's failure to maintain security, especially in riverine and remote areas, creates conditions where armed groups flourish. Ezekiel and Omojefe (2022) argue that weak security apparatus, poor infrastructure, and political interference collectively render the state incapable of monopolizing violence, thereby legitimizing self-help mechanisms among communities.

Closely related is the Security Dilemma Theory, which posits that in the absence of trust and effective security guarantees from the state, groups arm themselves defensively, but such armament is perceived as threatening by others, prompting an arms race (Herz, 1950). This theory helps explain the rapid and unchecked proliferation of SALW in the Niger Delta, where communities and militant groups continuously escalate their arsenals to safeguard interests, leading to entrenched cycles of violence and insecurity (Onuoha, 2022).

2.4.2 Adoption of Theoretical Framework for This Study

For the purpose of this study on the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in the Niger Delta and its threats to peace and development, the State Fragility and Security Dilemma Theory is adopted as the primary theoretical framework.

This theory is particularly suitable because it encapsulates the core challenges observed in the Niger Delta context namely, the failure of the Nigerian state to effectively provide security, enforce law and order, and deliver essential services across the region. The state's inability to assert a monopoly on the legitimate use of force creates a security vacuum that non-state actors exploit by arming themselves for protection, political leverage, or economic gain (Ezekiel &Omojefe, 2022).

Moreover, the Security Dilemma aspect of the theory explains the cyclical nature of arms accumulation among various groups. In an environment where trust in state institutions is low and threats are perceived as constant, communities and militant factions arm themselves defensively. This triggers reciprocal arming by rival groups, escalating violence and undermining peace efforts (Onuoha, 2022).

By applying this framework, the study gains analytical clarity on how weak governance structures, institutional failure, and mutual insecurity drive the sustained proliferation and misuse of SALW. This perspective allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the security challenges and the socio-political dynamics in the Niger Delta, informing more targeted policy interventions that strengthen state capacity while addressing local security concerns.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in the Niger Delta and its socio-economic and security impacts. The mixed-methods approach allows the researcher to capitalize on the strengths of both methodologies, enhancing the validity and depth of the findings through triangulation (Creswell, 2021). This approach is particularly suited for complex social phenomena such as SALW proliferation, where numeric data alone cannot capture underlying contextual and social dynamics (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2020).

The study will adopt a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data will be collected via structured questionnaires administered to 400 respondents from Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, and Akwa-Ibom states. The respondents will include youth leaders, ex-militants, security personnel, and civil society actors.

Qualitative data will be obtained through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with traditional rulers, policy experts, and NGO representatives. The quantitative data will be analyzed using statistical software, while qualitative data

will undergo thematic content analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns related to SALW proliferation and control. This triangulated methodology ensures both the reliability and validity of findings by capturing the complexity of the problem through multiple lenses.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. The questionnaires were designed to quantify perceptions of insecurity, prevalence of SALW, and developmental consequences, consistent with the data collection strategies recommended by Flick (2021). Semi-structured interviews with key informants including security officers, community leaders, and former militants provided qualitative depth, enabling exploration of issues beyond what quantitative measures can capture (Gill et al., 2021). Focus group discussions were conducted to gather diverse community perspectives and stimulate collective reflection on SALW-related challenges, following best practices in qualitative research (Lambert et al., 2021).

3.3 Participants and Sample Size

The study surveyed 400 respondents across three purposively selected states in the Niger Delta: Rivers, Delta, and Bayelsa. These states were selected due to their documented high incidences of SALW proliferation, strategic importance, and representation of varied socio-economic and geographic conditions within the region (Ajayi & Chukwuma, 2023; Onuoha, 2022). A stratified random sampling technique was utilized within each state to ensure representation from urban, rural, and riverine communities, thereby enhancing the generalizability of the findings (Babbie, 2021). Additionally, 20 key informants were purposively selected for in-depth interviews to provide expert insights on security and governance issues related to arms proliferation (Patton, 2021). Focus groups comprised 8 to 12 participants from affected communities to facilitate open discussion and capture collective experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2020).

3.4 Tools and Instruments Used

The questionnaire was developed based on validated constructs in recent studies and included both closed-ended and Likert-scale items to measure perceptions of

SALW impacts. Prior to full deployment, instruments were pilot-tested to assess reliability and validity. Cronbach's alpha tests confirmed strong internal consistency for the scales, with values exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70 (Tavakol&Dennick, 2021). The semi-structured interview and focus group guides were designed to encourage participants to elaborate on SALW dynamics and community responses, following qualitative instrument development guidelines (Rubin & Rubin, 2021).

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 28, with descriptive statistics summarizing respondent demographics and key variables. Inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and correlation analysis, were employed to examine relationships between variables related to SALW proliferation and its impacts (Field, 2020). Reliability of measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha tests to ensure consistent and trustworthy data interpretation (Gliem&Gliem, 2020). Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically, employing Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes. NVivo 13 software facilitated systematic coding and organization of qualitative data, ensuring rigorous qualitative analysis (Woods et al., 2021). The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings follows mixed-methods best practices to yield a holistic understanding of SALW proliferation in the Niger Delta context (Creswell, 2021).

4.0 Data Analysis and Interpretation

4.1 Presentation of Findings

This chapter presents the empirical results of the study examining the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in the Niger Delta. Data were collected from a total of 400 respondents sampled from Rivers, Delta, and Bayelsa States, supplemented by insights from 20 key informant interviews and focus group discussions.

4.1.1 Demographic Characteristics

Table 4.1 provides a summary of the demographic profile of respondents, categorized by gender, age, education level, and occupation. The sample was

composed of 60% male and 40% female participants, with the majority falling within the 18 to 45 years age bracket. Educational attainment showed that 55% had completed secondary education, while 30% possessed tertiary qualifications.

Gender		**Age Group**		
Male	Female	18-25	26-35	36-45
Above 45				
240	160	120	150	100
30				
60%	40%	30	37.5	25
7.5				
Education Level				
No formal education	**Primary**	**Secondary**	**Tertiary**	
20	30	220	120	
5	7.5	55	30	

Source: Field Survey, 2025

4.1.2 Prevalence and Sources of SALW

Data revealed that 67% of respondents frequently observed illicit firearms in their communities. Table 4.2 identifies maritime smuggling (42%) and political patronage (35%) as the leading perceived sources of SALW influx.

Source of SALW	Maritime smuggling	Political patronage	Local manufacturing	Cross-border trafficking
Frequency	168	140	60	32
Percentage (%)	42	35	15	8

Source: Field Survey, 2025

4.1.3 Impact of SALW on Security and Development

Respondents assessed the impact of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation on various aspects of security and development within their communities. The results revealed that a significant majority perceived SALW to contribute notably to local conflicts, economic sabotage, and kidnappings. Specifically, 75% of the respondents identified SALW as a major driver of local

conflicts, 60% highlighted its role in economic sabotage, and 55% linked it to the prevalence of kidnappings.

Impact Area	Local Conflicts	Economic Sabotage	Kidnappings
Frequency	300	240	220
Percentage (%)	75	60	55

Source: Field Survey, 2025

4.1.4 Reliability Analysis

The survey instrument's internal consistency was assessed through Cronbach's alpha tests, resulting in a coefficient of 0.82. This high reliability score confirms the consistency of the measurement scales across constructs such as perceptions of insecurity, economic impact, and political manipulation, thus validating the survey tool for this study.

4.1.5 Pearson Correlation Analysis

To examine the relationships among key variables, Pearson correlation coefficients were computed. Table 4.3 displays the correlation matrix for the main constructs: frequency of SALW sightings, perception of security impact, economic sabotage perception, and political patronage influence.

Variables	**Frequency of SALW Sightings**	**Perception of Security Impact**	**Perception of Economic Sabotage**
1	1.00	0.68**	0.54**
2	____	1.00	0.61**
3	____	____	1.00
4	____	____	____

4. Political Patronage Influence

0.72

0.66**

0.59**

1.00

****Note:** **p** < 0.01 (2-tailed)**

The results indicate strong positive correlations between the frequency of SALW sightings and perceptions of their impact on security ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$), economic sabotage ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.01$), and political patronage ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that increased observation of illicit firearms is significantly associated with heightened perceptions of their negative impacts in the Niger Delta.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal critical insights into the nature, sources, and impacts of SALW proliferation in the Niger Delta. The data, drawn from 400 respondents across Rivers, Delta, and Bayelsa States, provide a robust understanding of how these weapons influence peace and development in the region.

Firstly, the demographic profile indicates that the majority of respondents are within the economically active age range of 18–45 years, with a fair level of education—85% possessing at least a secondary education. This demographic distribution suggests that the respondents are likely to be informed and directly affected by the realities of armed violence and insecurity in their communities. This is consistent with the findings of Okon et al. (2021), who argue that youth in oil-rich regions are disproportionately exposed to the risks of armed violence due to socioeconomic marginalization.

In examining the prevalence and sources of SALW, the study found that 67% of respondents have observed the presence of illicit arms in their environment. Maritime smuggling (42%) and political patronage (35%) were identified as the main sources. These findings support the arguments made by Adetula (2022), who emphasized that weak border control, particularly via maritime routes, and the politicization of arms distribution significantly contribute to the uncontrolled flow of weapons. The implication here is that state actors and political elites may indirectly sustain the proliferation by arming supporters or militias during election cycles, thereby escalating the cycle of violence.

The correlation analysis using Pearson's method further confirmed the strength of relationships between the proliferation of SALW and key outcomes like insecurity,

economic decline, and underdevelopment. There was a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.01$) between the presence of SALW and increased local conflict, while a moderate correlation ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.01$) was observed between SALW proliferation and economic sabotage. These relationships reinforce earlier findings by Edeko and Okolie (2020), who found that the presence of illicit arms in the Niger Delta is directly linked to the destabilization of local economies, increased youth militancy, and reduced foreign investment.

Moreover, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82 for the survey instrument confirms the reliability and internal consistency of the items used to measure constructs such as perceived insecurity, political violence, and economic disruption. This validates the robustness of the responses and adds credibility to the statistical conclusions drawn.

The results have broad implications. The persistent circulation of SALW not only fuels violent conflict but also undermines state authority and obstructs meaningful development. Communities in the Niger Delta, already marginalized by ecological degradation and economic exploitation, face further deterioration in governance and safety due to these weapons. As supported by Ibrahim and Hassan (2023), long-term peace and development in the Niger Delta cannot be achieved without robust disarmament, improved border security, and the political will to end arms sponsorship.

5.0 Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Main Findings

This study investigated the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in the Niger Delta and its implications for security and development, focusing on Rivers, Delta, and Bayelsa States. Data were collected from 400 survey respondents, alongside 20 key informant interviews and focus group discussions. The findings indicate a high prevalence of SALW in the region, with 67% of respondents acknowledging the presence of illicit arms in their communities.

The main sources of SALW were identified as maritime smuggling (42%), political patronage (35%), and local manufacturing (15%). The impact of SALW was found

to be severe, especially in relation to local conflicts (75%), economic sabotage (60%), and kidnappings (55%). Statistical analysis using Pearson's correlation confirmed strong positive relationships between SALW proliferation and increased levels of insecurity, economic decline, and underdevelopment.

The internal reliability of the instrument was confirmed through a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.82, indicating a high level of consistency in measuring constructs such as political violence, economic impact, and security threats. These findings align with recent literature emphasizing the destabilizing effect of SALW in resource-rich but politically volatile regions such as the Niger Delta.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Policy and Legislative Action: The Federal Government, in partnership with the National Assembly, should enact and enforce stricter legislation to regulate the importation, manufacturing, and distribution of small arms. Enhanced surveillance of maritime and border regions is also critical.

2. Security Sector Reform: Strengthening border control mechanisms, especially along maritime routes, is essential to curbing smuggling. The Nigerian Customs Service, Navy, and other security agencies should be equipped with modern surveillance technologies to detect and intercept illegal arms.

3. Political Accountability: There must be deliberate efforts to hold political actors accountable for sponsoring violence or arming groups during elections. A dedicated anti-proliferation unit should be set up under the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to investigate and prosecute such offenses.

4. Community-Based Disarmament Initiatives: Local governments and community leaders should work with civil society to initiate disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs that offer alternatives to youths involved in armed violence.

5. Further Research: Future studies should examine the specific link between SALW and environmental crimes in the Niger Delta. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the effectiveness of disarmament programs could provide valuable insights into sustainable peace building.

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