

Assessment of the Effects of Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation on Socio-economic Development in Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study was conducted to assess the effects of Small Arms and Light Weapons proliferation on socio-economic development in Benue state, Nigeria. The study adopted cross sectional survey design. Simple random sampling technique was used to collect data from 400 respondents who were using structured questionnaires. Findings revealed that Small Arms and Light Weapons proliferation have negative effects on socio-economic development in Benue State, Nigeria. This study concluded that proliferation of small arms and light weapons have negative effects on socio-economic development in Benue State, Nigeria. The study therefore recommends efficient border control to prevent the flow of small arms and light weapons into the State. The study also recommends imposition of stiffer penalties for those found in possession of these arms without proper authorization. The study also recommends provision of job opportunities for youths to reduce the likelihood of them engaging in violent activities. Finally, the study recommends promotion of good governance and accountability to reduce the likelihood of politicians sponsoring violent groups.

Key words: Small arms, light weapons, proliferation, socio-economic development

Introduction

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation has become a globalized and an ever-influencing architect of the new international security agenda with serious effects on socio-economic development of societies across the globe. SALW are weapons which can be carried by normal infantry soldier and the list extends from pistols, grenades and bayonets through medium machine guns, grenades launchers, light mortars and hand held rocket launchers including some weapons usually defined as major, such as shoulder-fired surface-air to air missile systems and some anti-tank weapons (Abiodun, Ayo-Adeyekun, Ifeoluwa and Nwannenaya, 2018, Boutwell, Klare and Reed, 1999). The United Nations Panel of Experts on Small Arms in 1997 defined small arms as “those weapons designed for personal use while light weapons are those designed for use by several persons serving as a crew” (UN, 1997). Weapons categorized as small arms by the Panel include: revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, assault rifles, submachine guns, and light machine guns while light weapons include, heavy machine guns, hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, recoilless rifles, portable launchers of anti-tank and anti-aircraft missile systems, and mortars of less than 100mm caliber (UN, 1997). Furthermore, the UN (1997) panel also included ammunition and explosives in its definition of SALW and they are: Cartridges; Shells and missiles, Anti-personnel and anti-tank hand grenades; Landmines and Explosives (Abdullah and Rauf, 2012).

Proliferation on the other hand, suggests an increment, a leap or rise in the level of arms in society. This means that arms have become more easily available and accessible either quantitatively or qualitatively or both. It could be specific or different types of weapon systems that have been proliferated in a particular society or region. According to Emmanuel and Sunny (2024), the term, proliferation, refers to an increase in the number of weapons possessed by certain governments or in number of states possessing a particular weapons system, and could also imply a great increase in the numbers of particular weapons in a given area.

The distinction between horizontal and vertical proliferation further enhances our understanding of the conceptions of SALW proliferation. According to Toyin (2012), horizontal proliferation of weapons occurs when a state acquires weapons systems that it does not previously have while vertical proliferation refers to an increase in the stocks of weapons by a state through the acquisitions of more superior weapons systems. Both horizontal and vertical proliferation makes weapons available in the state and could easily diffuse and circulate, especially in states where security of stockpiles is weak and can be trafficked. Diffusion and circulation of arms are conceptually related to proliferation. Both terms tend to imply that arms are no longer under the exclusive control or monopoly of the states and governments and, therefore, have become more dispersed into society. According to Behera (2001), diffusion on the other hand, is defined as a dynamic process of the spread of light weapons throughout the world and all levels of society.

Across the world, easy accessibility and increasing diffusion of small arms and light weapons into society are key factors fueling violent crimes, and thus, undermining public safety (Bourne, 2007; Musah, 2002, Muggah, 2001). Dedi and Prasetya (2022) observed that, these Arms are precisely small and light. They circulate easily because they are small and light, easy to buy, easy to use, easy to transport and easy to conceal. Their proliferation exacerbates conflicts, sparks refugees' flows, and undermines the rule of law and spawn a culture of violence and impunity. According to Sambo et al (2020) the emergence of Terrorists organizations like, the Islamic States movements such as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the Middle East, Al-Shabaab in East Africa and Boko-Haram, Banditry, Fulani Herders/Terrorists in Nigeria are illustrative of the escalating trends in armed violence and dynamics of small arms and light weapons proliferation.

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) has been given wide spread international focus in the post- cold war era (Baxter, 2008). This is because these weapons have become the primary tools of ethnic, internal conflict, banditry and kidnapping in recent times. They have been the sources of violence, wars, conflict and crimes. It is a phenomenon that is destabilizing the peace, development and threatening the National security and development of sovereign States. The truth of the matter is that, in nearly all conflict and crime, the diffusion of Small Arms and Light weapons particularly from industrialized nations to developing world has played a decisive role in escalating and intensifying the various threats to our national security and development (Abubakar and Ibrahim, 2011).

The proliferation of small arms is a global scourge with devastating human effects. According to Jimmy and Osogi (2024), the SALW are indeed, the real weapons of mass destruction (Soetan, S.O, 2017; Small Arms Survey Report, 2018). Recent estimate from Small Arms Survey, (2024) suggests that over "875 million firearms circulate across the globe, 650 million constituting 73% are possessed by civilians, and 270 million of these civilian possessions are in the USA, while not fewer than one million are held by insurgent groups worldwide and Nigeria in particular accounts for 70% of illicit weapons in West Africa" (Vanguard, 2016).

The problem of proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) has intensified in Nigeria since the late '60s to the very end of the Nigerian-Biafran war and after. Jacob, Jonathan and Danjuma (2019) observed that, since the priority then, of both parties were to win the war at all cost, this made for massive importation of arms and weapons into the country. Locally made small arms and light weapons were also produced including rifles, pistols, and land mines and other explosives. Some of these arms, either imported or locally made are still in circulation till date. The problem of illicit production, sales, distribution and trafficking of small

arms and light weapons have threatened human welfare and dignity in many parts of the country particularly from the North East and North Central of the country (Olufunke, Jonathan and Onuh, 2023).

Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the country is worrisome now that the government faces a mirage daunting task of exerting control and reducing the circulation, availability and diffusion of Small Arms and Light Weapons through its borders and sea routes into the country (Bromund, 2015).

As such, Benue State also faces serious security threat because of proliferation of these small arms and light weapons. The inflow of small arms and light weapons has caused a lot of havoc to the people of Benue State. It made the state to persistently experience ethnic and communal conflicts, armed banditry, Fulani terrorist attacks, kidnapping and political violence. Benue State has been plagued by violent attacks, resulting in significant loss of life. Amnesty International Report (2025) reported that, between may 2023 to Sept, 2025, over 6,896 people were killed in more than 50 communities in series of attacks across Benue State. This led to significant displacement, with 489,245 internally displaced persons (IDPs) accommodated in IDP camps and host communities as from the march of 2023 to sept., 2025.

Amnesty International Report (2025) reported that, in Gwer West LGA, at least 42 people were shot dead by suspected Fulani herders in a series of weekend attacks. At Yelewata in Guma LGA, over 200 people were killed in an attack, with many more missing, injured, or left without adequate medical care. In Mbaivur community of Gwer East LGA, dozens of people were feared dead, with at least 30 reported killed including two Catholic Priests and many more injured. In Katsina-Ala, Kwande and Logo LGAs 56 fatalities including one NKST Pastor and his wife, 19 police officers and other security personnel including Gallant police officer ASP Danlamin Usman popular known as Danzuru who has been known for his bravery in fighting criminals in the society were reported with the number potentially rising as search operations continue. Also in Otukpo, Ohimini and Agatu LGAs where, 11 individuals lost their lives in a separate incident and over 200 people were killed and displaced respectively. These attacks are often linked to disputes between farmers and herders, exacerbated by climate change, overgrazing, desertification and obviously claiming of Benue people ancestral land. The Nigerian government has faced criticism for its response to the escalating violence, with Amnesty International highlighting the need for urgent action to avert a humanitarian catastrophe.

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons has severe negative effects on socio-economic development. Olufunke, Jonathan and Onuh (2023) maintained that, proliferation of SALW has led to increased violence, displacement, and instability, ultimately disrupting economic activities and hindering development. This can invariably led to Food insecurity as agricultural activities are disrupted, and communities are forced to flee or become internally displaced. When attacks are waged on farmlands where farmers have their livelihoods met they are discouraged from food production that can lead to food scarcity and increased food prices. Toyin (2012) asserts that, incessant violence that forces people to flee, leading to displacement and migration that disrupts economic activities, exacerbating poverty, unemployment, business operations, with entrepreneurs shutting down businesses and loss of livelihoods due to insecurity. This has a negative effect on the economy and Loss of Income. Emmanuel and Sunny (2024) observe that, the easy availability of SALW poses a significant threat to development, as it fuels violent crimes, terrorist activities, disruption of social services, including education and healthcare, and impedes growth. Overall, the effects of SALW proliferation in Nigeria at large and Benue State in particular are far-reaching, affecting various aspects of socio-economic development and posing significant challenges to the development and stability (Aliegba, B.A, & Mngohol, M.M, 2021).

Therefore, the specific objective of this study is to assess the effects of proliferation of SALW on socio-economic development in Benue State, Nigeria.

Methodology

The study area is Benue State. Benue State has 23 (twenty-three) Local Government Areas, 14 from Tiv-speaking area, 7 from Idoma-speaking area and 2 from Igede. Benue State is situated in the North-Central geographical Zone of Nigeria. It is bounded by six States namely, Nasarawa State to the North, Taraba State to the North-East, Cross River State to the South, Ebonyi and Enugu States to the South-West and Kogi State to the West. Benue State also shares a small section of the nation's international boundary with the Republic of Cameroon to the South-East. The State has a projected population of about 6,619,000 (six million, six hundred and nineteen thousand) people based on annual average growth of 2.5% (NPC, 2006 as 2024 projected).

The topography of Benue State is with rivers, streams, and sporadic hills scattered across the area. The vast coverage of fertile topsoil provides the basis or the extensive form of peasant agriculture which gives rise as to why Benue State is known as the "Food Basket of the Nation". The vegetation of the State consists of rain forests which have tall trees and tall grasses that occupy both the Western and Southern fringes, while the Guinea Savannah is found in the Eastern and Northern parts with mixed grasses and trees are generally of vegetation height (Our Benue Our Future, 2008). Culturally, the settlement pattern is predominantly nucleated in Benue South-East zone, while the Benue North-East and North-West pattern is sparse with some areas exhibiting the linear pattern along major road networks. The people of Benue State belong to several ethnic groups but the predominant ethnic groups are Tiv, Idoma, and Igede.

The socio-economic development in Benue State is largely characterized by informal sector activities with agriculture as the major economic activity. Agriculture forms the backbone of the economy of the State engaging more than 70% of the working population. Considerable proportion of Benue State population resides in rural areas and engaged activity is in agriculture. Important cash crops include soya-beans, rice, groundnut, mangoes, and citrus. Food crops include yams, sweet potatoes, beans, maize, millet, guinea-corn, and vegetables. There are few commercial farms in existence. The commonest livestock kept are pigs, goats, sheep, and poultry (BNARDA, 2006).

The SALW proliferation in Benue State is a pressing concern, exacerbating conflicts and insecurity that has severe negative effects on socio-economic development of the State. The insecurity poses security risks that can hinder economic development, disrupt farming activities, and increase crime rates, leading to displacement and human rights abuses in the State due to banditry, kidnapping, and armed robbery, undermining efforts to maintain peace and stability.

The population of this study consists of both adult male and female who were victims of violence, business owners, community leaders, Security personnel, and government officials aimed at studying the effects of proliferation of small arms and light weapons on the socio-economic development in Benue State, Nigeria.

The study used multistage sampling technique. At the first stage, cluster sampling technique was used to cluster the state into zones A, B and C. The second process involved purposeful selection of three senatorial geo-political zones regarded as zone A, B and C. At the second stage, simple random sampling technique was employed to select three LGAs from each of the zones making a total of 9 LGAs by writing the names of all the local governments areas of each zone and shuffling them in a bowl; the researcher would randomly pick until the required number was arrived at in each zone. These LGAs include, K/Ala, Logo and Kwande (Zone A), Guma, Gwer-west and Gwer-east (Zone, B) and, Otukpo, Agatu and Ohimini (Zone, C). The LGAs were selected because of incessant attacks witnessed in them; but most importantly this technique of sample selection was useful to this study because it gave every zone an equal chance of being included in the study.

In selecting the respondents, the researcher utilised haphazard sampling technique to select respondents. A total of 428 samples were administered semi-structured interview and only 400 were returned. Data were collected through face to face contact with the respondents. Data collected were presented and analyzed quantitatively using frequencies and simple percentages.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

A.	Sex	Frequency (400)	Percentage(%)
	Male	294	73.5
	Female	106	26.5
B.	Age		
	18 years – 35 years	97	24.25
	36 years – 55 years	257	64.25
	56 years and above	46	11.05
C.	Occupation		
	Farming	169	42.225
	Trading/Business	152	38.00
	Civil Servant	79	19.75
D.	Education		
	Non-literate	154	38.5
	Primary education	127	31.75
	Secondary education	101	25.25
	Tertiary education	18	4.5
	Total	400	100

Source: Research Survey, 2025

The above result showed that, 294 respondents representing 73.5% of the sample population were males whereas 106 respondents representing 26.5% were female. In term of age, the result reveals that, 97 respondents representing 24.25% were from the ages of 18 years-35 years, 257 respondents representing 64.25% were from the ages of 36 years-55 years while 46 respondents representing 11.5% were from the ages of 56 years and above. The data reveals that 169 respondents representing 42.25% were farmers, 152 respondents representing 38.00% were Traders/businessmen whereas 79 respondents representing 19.75% were civil servants. In terms of educational attainment, 154 respondents representing 38.5% were non-literate, 127 respondents representing 31.75% were holders of primary education certificate, 101 respondents representing 25.25% were holders of secondary education certificate whereas 18 respondents representing 4.5% were holders of Tertiary education certificate.

Table 2: Respondents on main groups in possession of SALW in Benue State

Groups	Frequency	Percentage
Herders	116	29.0
Farmers	24	6.0
Civilians	20	5.0
Bandits	93	23.3
Armed Robbers	59	14.7
Kidnappers	37	9.3
Ethnic militia	51	12.7
Total	400	100

Source: Research survey, 2025

The Table contains information on the main groups that posses SALW in Benue State. The Table has revealed that herders where were the dominant groups with 29%. This was followed by bandits with 23.3%, armed robbers with 14.7%, ethnic militia with 12.7%, kidnappers with 9.3%, farmers with 6.0% and civilians with 5.0%. It can be deduced from the findings that the

above captured SALW are commonly used in Benue State. This is partly consistent with the findings of Paulina, Terver and Samson (2023) that the groups such as herders, bandits and farmers have been found to be in possession of SALW into Benue Valley. Weapons such as like AK-47 rifles, pistols, revolvers, sub-machine guns, light machine guns and mounted grenades are commonly used by these groups.

Table 3: Respondents on commonest used SALW in Benue State

Weapon	Frequency (400)	Percentage (100 %)
AK-47 rifles	85	21.25
Pistols (locally and imported)	73	18.25
Revolvers	72	18.0
Sub-machine guns	70	17.5
Light machine guns	62	15.5
Mounted grenades	38	9.5
Total	400	100%

Source: Research survey, 2025

Data on the commonest used SALW in Benue State showed that AK-47 rifles were commonly used representing 21.25% (85), 18.25% (73) respondents indicated that pistols were commonly used, 18.0% (72) respondents indicated that revolvers were commonly used, 17.5% (70) respondents indicated that sub-machine guns were commonly used, 15.5% (62) respondents indicated that light machine guns were commonly used, while 9.5% (38) respondents indicated that mounted grenades were the commonly used weapons in Benue State. This finding deduced that the commonest used weapons in Benue State were AK-47 rifles. This consistent with the findings of Paulina, Terver and Samson (2023) that infiltration of SALW into Benue Valley particularly AK-47 rifles aggravated conflicts between Pastoralists and farmers in the Benue Valley.

Table 3: Areas where SALW are commonly used in Benue State

Areas	Frequency	Percentage
Sankera	201	50.3
Guma	75	18.8
Gwer East	63	15.8
Kwande	31	7.8
Others	30	7.5
Total	400	100

Source: Research survey, 2025

The Table contains information on the areas in Benue State that SALW is common. The Table has revealed that Sankera scored highest with 50.3%. This area comprised of Ukum, Katsina-Ala and Logo Local Government Areas. This was followed by Guma with 18.8%, Gwer East with 15.8%, Kwande with 7.8%, and others with 7.5%.only used by these groups. This finding echoes a study by Paulina, Terver and Samson (2023) on infiltration of SALW into Benue Valley, which mentioned Sankera as one of the areas where use of SALW is pervasive.

Table 4: Respondents on effects of the SALW proliferation on socio-economic development

Variable	Frequency (400)	Percentage (100%)
Food Insecurity	85	21.25
Disruption of Economic Activities	73	18.25
Forced displacement and migration	72	18.0
Increased Violence and Insecurity	70	17.5
Negative impact on Business and Investment	62	15.5
Increased poverty	38	9.5
Total	400	100

Source: Research Survey, 2025

The Table 4 above on the effects of SALW showed that, 85 respondents representing 21.25% indicated food insecurity, 73 respondents representing 18.25% indicated disruption of economic activities, 72 respondents representing 18.0% indicated forced displacement and migration, 70 respondents representing 17.5% indicated increased violence and insecurity, 62 respondents representing 15.5% indicated negative impact on business and investment, whereas 38 respondents representing 9.5% indicated increased poverty.

The above findings indicate that proliferation of SALW in Benue State has severe negative effects on socio-economic development. This is in agreement with Olufunke, et al(2023) who found that, proliferation of SALW has severe effects on socio-economic development in Benue State including disruption of economic activities and hindering development, food insecurity as agricultural activities are disrupted, and communities are forced to flee or become internally displaced, increased poverty and unemployment particularly among youth, who may be coerced into joining armed groups or engaging in illicit activities, the wide spread availability of SALW has contributed to the institutionalization of a culture of violence and as one of the effects, it also has a negative effect on business and investment in the State. Many businesses have been forced to shut down, and investors are no longer willing to invest in the State due to the insecurity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concluded that the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Benue State has had significant negative effects on socio-economic development of the State. Effects such as food insecurity, disruption of economic activities, forced displacement and migration, increased violence and insecurity, negative impact on business and investment and increased poverty.

The study therefore recommends efficient border control by government to prevent the inflow of small arms and light weapons into the State. This can be actualized through close cooperation between security forces and local inhabitants in effort to combat the scourge of cross-border proliferation of small arms and light weapon into State. There should be promotion of good governance and accountability to reduce the likelihood of politicians sponsoring violent groups. Stiffer penalties should be imposed for those found in possession of small arms and light weapons without proper authorization. Constant road check (road block) should be organized as a preventive measure with the aims of apprehending the individuals being sought and to prevent trafficking in arms and ammunitions, and creation of job opportunities for youths can reduce the likelihood of them engaging in violent activities.

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