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Illicit Small Arms Proliferation and Internal Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa: Rethinking Arms Governance

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the proliferation of illicit small arms and light weapons (SALW), which constitutes one of the most persistent threats to peace and stability in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Despite the existence of comprehensive legal and institutional frameworks at global, regional, and national levels, the circulation of illicit arms continues to fuel internal conflicts, weaken state authority, and undermine human security. This study examines the structural enablers, operational mechanisms, and governance deficiencies that sustain the SALW phenomenon, while assessing the effectiveness and adaptability of existing arms control regimes. Drawing on qualitative research conducted in Cameroon, Mali, Kenya, and the Central African Republic, the analysis integrates field interviews, policy documents, and secondary literature, applying François Thual's geopolitical method to explore the strategic interests and interactions of state and non-state actors. The findings reveal that the persistence of illicit arms flows is driven by both external and internal factors, including porous borders, post-Cold War arms surpluses, fragile institutions, unregulated local arms production, and socio-economic grievances. These dynamics collectively deepen fragility, prolong conflicts, and entrench cultures of violence. This article submits that current SALW governance frameworks remain overly state-centric and prohibition-oriented, focusing mainly on supply-side control while neglecting the demand-side motivations linked to insecurity, inequality, and livelihood vulnerability. To address these limitations, the paper advocates for a paradigm shift toward a hybrid, multi-level governance model that combines state regulation with community engagement, regional cooperation, and human security-based approaches. As such, "silencing the guns" in Africa requires moving beyond coercive disarmament toward inclusive, context-sensitive arms governance that reinforces institutional legitimacy, addresses local security needs, and promotes citizen-centered peacebuilding. By rethinking arms governance as part of broader state-building and development processes, this paper contributes to advancing both the theory and practice of conflict transformation in fragile African contexts.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Every year in Sub-Saharan Africa many lives are lost in the various armed conflicts that litter the continent. The Uppsala Conflict data program holds that over 2 million Africans lost their lives to armed conflict between 1989 and 2024 (UCDP, 2025). These figures, which do not take into consideration deaths through indirect consequences of armed conflict such as starvation, sickness, difficult access to social amenities etc, are not mere statistics. They are a reflection of the negative impact of armed conflict on the African continent. This impact has increasingly been felt following the end of the Cold war. During this period, a new paradigm emerged in the African conflict environment as interstate conflicts were progressively shelved in favour of intra-State conflicts. These conflicts either oppose non-state antagonistic armed groups amongst each other or against the government for several reasons (identity, natural resources, ideology, religion, power struggle and wealth allocation etc). The fact that Sub-Saharan Africa has had the lion's share of these conflicts has led some authors to refer to it as "a continent at war with itself" (Adebayo, 1999, p.3). In fact, the Geneva Academy holds that Africa currently has more than 35 non-international armed conflicts. (Geneva Academy, 2025).

Most of these conflicts are fueled by small arms and light weapons (SALW).This category of firearms is both cheap, readily available, easy to manipulate, and dissimulate, making them weapons of choice for non-state armed groups, criminal groups, community militia, and private individuals. Amani Africa holds that *"the proliferation of and easy access to illicit arms and weapons continues to be a major factor in fueling conflicts and making inter-communal clashes increasingly deadly. It remains to be a single critical instrument that enables terrorist groups, armed militias, criminal bandits, and vigilante groups in various conflict and crisis settings on the continent. Indeed, this is one of the factors that has made the increase in the number of conflicts and the expansion of the geographic spread of such conflicts, particularly those involving armed terrorist groups."* The presence of illicit SALW and their negative impact on conflict across the continent led the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to tag them as Africa's "*Weapons of Mass Destruction*" (Annan, 2000, p.52). It should however be noted that SALW don't cause the conflicts in which they are used, but their presence complicates conflict resolution efforts and aggravates these conflicts.

African States and the international community at large are not unaware of this SALW threat. Consequently, SALW governance frameworks have been developed at both the global, regional, sub-regional, and national levels. At the global level, the United Nations Firearms Protocol, the Program of Action to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit trade in Small Arms

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and Light Weapons in all its aspects (PoA), and the Arms Trade Treaty set the stage for governance regulatory frameworks. These frameworks were replicated at the regional (African Union Strategy on the control of illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons; the "Silencing the guns in Africa by the year 2020 vision" and the Bamako Declaration on an African common position on the illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons); sub-regional (the Kinshasa Convention for ECCAS, the Abuja Convention for ECOWAS, the Nairobi Protocol for IGAD and the Blantyre Protocol for SADC); and national levels. Unfortunately, SALWs continue to fuel conflicts after more than two decades of arms governance in Sub-Saharan Africa. This could be a pointer to the fact that current arms governance frameworks are either ineffective or non-adapted. There is thus a need to rethink arms governance frameworks in order to render them more adapted to African realities and beef up African operational capacity in this domain.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present work adopts a carefully considered methodological framework which integrates both primary and secondary data, while applying rigorous analytical tools to ensure depth, validity, and reliability of findings. The choice of this framework is informed by the sensitive and complex nature of the subject under study—namely, the proliferation and governance of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in Sub-Saharan Africa—where state and non-state actors interact in a fluid and often opaque environment. The methodological strategy thus aims to capture both the empirical realities on the ground and the broader strategic and geopolitical dynamics in which these realities are embedded.

Primary data was obtained through semi-structured interviews and the administration of questionnaires to selected actors in the arms control and management chain across four African countries: Cameroon, Mali, Kenya, and the Central African Republic. These countries were deliberately chosen because they represent both conflict-affected and transitional contexts where the proliferation of SALW has had profound impacts on governance, security, and development. Selecting a diverse set of cases allowed for the identification of patterns as well as context-specific variations, thereby strengthening the comparative depth of the analysis (Yin, 2018). Respondents were purposively selected to ensure that the study drew upon the experiences and expertise of individuals directly implicated in arms governance. The sample comprised forty individuals, ten from each case study country, including government officials, security practitioners, and civil society representatives. The inclusion of members of National Small Arms Commissions and government departments in charge of arms control and

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legislation was justified by their statutory responsibility for designing and implementing regulatory frameworks. Their insights provided valuable information on the extent to which existing policies are adapted to the realities on the ground. Workers from Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Commissions were equally included because of their proximity to the demilitarisation of ex-combatants and the reintegration of weapons into formal stockpiles, thus providing perspectives on both successes and challenges in post-conflict disarmament processes. Armoury managers and security officers responsible for weapons storage were interviewed to shed light on the management of state-held arms stockpiles, an often-overlooked but critical element in curbing proliferation, given that diversion and leakage from official stockpiles frequently fuel illicit markets (Mangan et al, 2019). Civil society organisations were included because of their role in advocacy, community sensitisation, and, in some cases, direct monitoring of illicit arms flows. Their views were indispensable in capturing grassroots perspectives and understanding the socio-political consequences of proliferation. Experts and resource persons, including academics and practitioners with long-standing engagement in SALW issues, were consulted to provide analytical reflections and comparative perspectives across different contexts. Finally, representatives of multinational joint task forces were included because they occupy a unique vantage point in transnational arms flows and regional cooperation initiatives.

The interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour on average, a duration chosen to balance the need for depth with the practical constraints of respondents' availability. The semi-structured format was particularly suited to this research because it combined structure with flexibility. While a guiding questionnaire ensured comparability across cases, respondents were encouraged to elaborate on their experiences, provide narratives, and highlight aspects often absent from official documents. This approach was indispensable for a subject matter that is both sensitive and politically charged, where nuances, perceptions, and implicit meanings are as important as overt statements (Creswell, 2013). The information sought through these interactions related to the effectiveness of existing arms control mechanisms, the role and responsibilities of institutions, the challenges encountered in enforcing regulations, the involvement of non-state actors, and the political, economic, and social drivers of proliferation. Considering the sensitive nature of the topic, most respondents, especially those working with government departments in charge of arms management, were not willing to be interviewed. Most of them agreed to give information only on the condition that their identities were not going to be revealed. This ethical pact of anonymity and confidentiality explains why a list of resource persons or respondents would not be provided in this study.

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In parallel, secondary data was extensively mobilised to complement and validate the insights generated through fieldwork. The use of secondary sources was justified both by the need to place empirical findings within a broader historical and comparative context and by the limitations inherent in primary data collection in sensitive domains. The secondary materials included scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral theses, and dissertations, which provided theoretical framing and academic debates on SALW proliferation and governance. Reports by Non-Governmental Organisations and International Organizations and specialized agencies such as UNIDIR, UNODA, UNMAS, RECSA as well as websites and reports of peacekeeping operations such as MINUSCA and MINUSMA, were essential in offering updated field-based assessments and advocacy perspectives. Documents from National Small Arms Commissions and governmental agencies provided official statistics, policy frameworks, and national strategies, while newspaper articles and media reports captured the immediacy of events and the discourses surrounding them in the public sphere.

Databases such as those of the Small Arms Survey and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute were particularly crucial for providing longitudinal and cross-country data on arms transfers, conflict dynamics, and governance responses. By drawing upon these diverse secondary sources, the study was able to triangulate data, correct for potential biases inherent in any single source, and produce a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the SALW phenomenon. Moreover, the secondary sources helped to identify trends over time, such as the shifting routes of illicit arms flows, the emergence of new actors, or the evolution of regional initiatives, thereby situating the primary data within broader trajectories.

The analysis of the collected data followed qualitative methods. Primary data was analyzed through thematic coding, whereby transcripts from interviews were systematically reviewed to identify recurring themes, categories, and sub-categories that corresponded to the research questions. Deductive reasoning was used to test existing theoretical assumptions against the empirical realities revealed by respondents, while remaining open to emergent findings that might challenge or refine these assumptions (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Secondary data was subjected to content analysis, enabling the systematic examination of reports, publications, and official documents in order to identify discursive patterns, institutional narratives, and policy trajectories. This ensured that findings were not only descriptive but also interpretive, linking local realities to broader governance and policy frameworks (Krippendorff, 2019)

To enrich this analysis further, the study employed the geopolitical method of François Thual

(Thual, 1996), which emphasizes the interrogation of actors' strategies and motivations through a series of fundamental questions: Who wants what? With whom? Why? and How? Applied to the domain of SALW proliferation, this method enabled the identification of actors, their modus operandi, their alliances, and their underlying motivations for either the use or misuse of weapons. In relation to control mechanisms, the same questions—Who does what? With who? How? and why? —allowed for the mapping of stakeholders engaged in arms control initiatives, their actions, their partnerships, and the challenges that constrain their effectiveness.

The choice of Thual's method was justified by the complexity of the issue at hand. SALW proliferation is not simply a technical or legal matter but one that is deeply embedded in power relations, geopolitical interests, and socio-economic dynamics. A purely descriptive analysis would obscure the strategic calculations that sustain proliferation networks and the incentives that shape actors' behaviour. By applying a geopolitical lens, the study was able to go beyond surface-level accounts to uncover the deeper logic of interactions in the SALW domain (Krause,2012).

In sum, the methodology adopted for this study integrates the strengths of primary and secondary data collection, while deploying analytical techniques capable of capturing both the empirical and strategic dimensions of the problem. The careful selection of respondents ensured that the perspectives of key institutional, security, and civil society actors were represented, while the breadth of secondary sources allowed for the triangulation of data and the embedding of findings in broader scholarly and policy debates. The use of qualitative analysis, combined with the geopolitical method, provided a rich and nuanced framework that not only identifies actors and their actions but also interprets their motivations and strategic orientations. This methodological architecture thus ensures that the study meets the standards of scientific rigour while also producing findings that are both theoretically grounded and practically relevant for policy and governance in Sub-Saharan Africa.

III. Results and Discussion

In order to operate an autopsy of SALW governance in Sub-Saharan Africa, it will be important to successively analyze the enablers of SALW proliferation, the consequences of this on internal conflicts, and current SALW governance frameworks on the continent.

A. Enablers of SALW Proliferation in Sub-Saharan Africa.

SALW proliferation in SSA is triggered by various determinants. These enablers favour the presence and circulation of illicit SALW across the continent. They facilitate the smuggling and movement of illicit arms through various methods.

1. Factors that favour SALW proliferation in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The SALWs present in Sub-Saharan Africa are both from within the continent and beyond. While most of these arms are imported or smuggled into to the continent, a non-negligible quantity of them is produced locally. The proliferation of illicit SALW in SSA can thus be explained by both external and domestic factors.

a. External enablers of SALW proliferation in SSA

External enablers refer to those dynamics of the external environment that favour the transfer and smuggling of arms across national borders. They include both historical, political, economic, and cultural factors. Historico-political determinants include the colonial legacy characterised by the arbitrary carving out of national borders which have consequently remained porous, unmanned and vast; the end of the Cold war and the search for new markets both for the large stocks of former Soviet arms (Oluwadare, 2014),(Van der Graaf, 1997) and redundant small arms due to military downsizing in Europe; the prevalence of cross-border armed conflicts and the proliferation of non-state armed groups especially following the fall of the Libyan Leader Muamar Ghadaffi (Varisco et al., 2022), (Maikomo and Ngomba, 2017). This has especially been felt in the Sahel region where former Libyan soldiers migrated alongside their weapons to parts of Northern Mali to join the Azawad revolution that was ongoing. Besides these, we equally have economic and strategic enablers such as cross border crime. Criminal groups either engage in arms trafficking or seek arms to perpetuate their criminal activities (Blum, 2016), (Addo, 2006). Moreover, the internet, especially the dark web has facilitated illicit trafficking as arms dealers conclude their deals in this virtual space with ease, especially given the limited capacity of African state Security Forces to control such borderless interactions (Shubhdeep and Sukhchandan, 2020), (Maikomo and Ngomba, 2017). Furthermore, the activities of mercenaries and private military companies equally facilitate cross-border illicit arms movements in many parts of the continent (Bowen, 2023).

b. Internal enablers of SALW proliferation in Africa

Internal or domestic enablers on their part refer to those endogenic dynamics that favour the illicit circulation and use of SALW on the continent. These include the existence of local arms production capacity for both local and modern arms (Sowale and Abiodum 2018), (Holtom and Pavesi, 2018) and the prevalence of internal armed conflicts (SIPRI 2020). In addition, poor management of national stockpiles (UNREC, 2016), (Mangan and Nowak, 2019), bad governance and endemic poverty (Van der Graaf, 1997), (Magrin and Perouse de Montelos, 2018); entrenched practices such as cattle rustling and the use of arms to protect livestock in

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countries like Kenya (Greiner, 2013) equally contribute to SALW proliferation in SSA. Moreover, illicit practices such as illegal poaching in the Central African Republic and Cameroon or gold mining in Mali, the use of SALW in cultural displays in Cameroon (Batcha 2010), and their valorisation in countries such as Zimbabwe, Namibia and Angola where the AK 47 represents freedom and liberation, are equally important enablers of their proliferation and use.

B. Methods of SALW proliferation in SSA

Owing to the favourable environment created by the various enablers discussed above, illicit arms dealers and users have devised diverse methods to ensure the presence and circulation of these war machines, especially in conflict zones across SSA. By methods of SALW proliferation, we refer to the means or mechanisms by which illicit SALW circulate in SSA. These methods are both National and Transnational. National methods are those used to facilitate SALW proliferation within the territorial confines of states while transnational methods are those used for arms movements from one country to another within the continent or from outside the continent into it.

1. National methods of SALW proliferation in SSA

National methods of SALW proliferation in SSA include diversion of legally existing national or government stockpiles. This could be due to theft or attacks on armouries of defence and security forces (Small Arms Survey, 2019, p.47) as was the case in Burkina Faso in 2011, the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2021 and 2022, Mauritania in 2005 and the Central African Republic between 2012 and 2013 (UNREC, 2016). Diversion could equally be because of defecting law enforcement personnel fleeing with their guns. This was the case in the Central African Republic where at least 127 government forces were reported to have defected to a coalition of rebel groups, in 2020, taking along their weapons (Varisco et al., 2022). Moreover, diversion has equally been caused by corrupt arms management officials who sell out weapons under their possession or facilitate their theft and at times replace them with non-functional ones, or by unscrupulous law enforcement personnel who, out of negligence or due to their desire to make quick money, loan out their weapons to illegal users or abandon them at the mercy of criminals. Such cases have been reported in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia, amongst others (Varisco et al., 2022).

Another national method of SALW proliferation in SSA is the local crafting of firearms in countries such as Cameroon, Nigeria, Kenya, Mali etc, and the illicit conversion of blank, imitation, non-lethal or obsolete firearms into lethal arms (Florquin and King, 2018).

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Conversion here includes both the alteration of originally non-lethal purpose imitation firearms and the reactivation of those whose firing capabilities were removed or significantly downgraded. (Florquin, 2019). SALW conversion in SSA is facilitated by important flows of Turkish imitation arms, especially into North and West Africa. Turkish alarm pistols, for instance, reportedly circulate in countries like Djibouti, Egypt, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Burkina Faso, the CAR, Chad, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritania, and Niger. (Florquin and King, 2018).

2. Transnational methods of SALW proliferation

As earlier discussed, most of the illicit SALW present in SSA originate from outside the region. As such, transnational methods of SALW proliferation include arms trade involving both government forces and non-state actors. Moreover, Illicit transfers or smuggling are a major method of introducing illicit SALW into the continent. (Otuya, 2009). This is done through undeclared shipments, falsified shipment documents, dismantling and dissimulating firearms inside bags of cereals or other goods, or inside the fuel tanks of cars and motorcycles, or through free flows in ungoverned spaces where state authority is either absent or weak such as the North of Mali, the East of the DRC, the Central African Republic and parts of Somalia. These illicit transfers are facilitated by porous borders and inefficient border controls.

Furthermore, SALW have been introduced into SSA through foreign military assistance agreements. These cooperation agreements often include arms supply and capacity building. This has been the case with Russian firearms in CAR and Mali. In addition, refugees have reportedly moved arms across borders as they run to safety in countries such as Kenya and Cameroon.(Mogire, 2003).

Similarly, proxy buying is another method of SALW proliferation. By proxy buying, we mean countries or groups who organise arms transfers in place of the real buyers. This is especially the case with countries under UN arms embargoes who are obliged to hide behind other states to purchase arms. Sudanese aircrafts reportedly supplied weapons to the CAR in January 2021 despite its arms embargo. (Varisco et al. 2022) .

C. The Impact of SALW on internal conflicts in SSA

Small arms and light weapons fuel conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa. Once in conflict situations, SALW serve several purposes. These uses depend on the actors involved and the expected results. They can be used legally by government forces in their defence and security missions. In such situations, SLAWs are used to protect the state, its institutions, and its territorial integrity against foreign aggressors (national defence) or to ensure internal security through the protection of persons and their property, as well as in law enforcement. Similarly, they are used

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by private security and military companies in countries where the use of arms by these private security actors it authorised. Furthermore, in conflict situations SALW are used as tools of peacekeeping in the various UN peacekeeping missions across the continent. This is the case in the DRC, Somalia, and the CAR. Moreover, private individuals and communities use SALW for self-defence, especially in areas of weak state presence or ungoverned spaces.

Besides these legal uses, SALWs are equally used for obnoxious ends such as terrorism, political instability, crime commission, illegal poaching, cattle rustling and for armed hostilities, especially by non-State armed groups and criminal organisations. The SALWs used in this case are often illicit ones, which produce far-reaching consequences.

1. Consequences of SALW proliferation on internal conflicts in SSA

SALW proliferation has often been described as the "primary enabler" of violent conflict (Ayuba and Okafor, 2014). Their presence complicates conflict resolution initiatives, encourages the resort to violence and aggravates hostility in conflicts that would otherwise have been peaceful. The ramifications of SALW proliferation on internal conflicts in the continent are both political, security-related, economic and social.

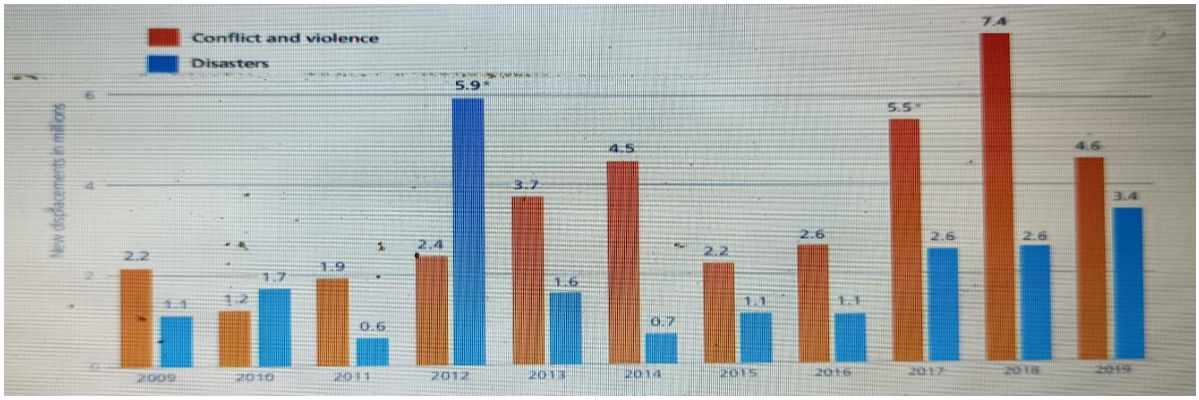
Politically, SALWs have triggered political instability and state fragility in Mali, CAR, Somalia, electoral violence in Kenya and secessionist insurgency in Cameroon. Other countries where SALW have provoked political instability over the years include the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Angola, Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, Ghana, South Sudan, Senegal, Liberia, Sierral Leone, DRC, Congo etc. This has either been as a result of contested election results, coups d'état, economic recession, succession disputes etc (Downie and Cooke, 2011). Moreover, SALW encourages the resort to violence in the expression of grievances. As protagonists arms themselves, they are less likely to seek peace by peaceful means. This creates a kind of security dilemma given that the effect of one group arming itself is that it increases the insecurity of others and pushes them too to seek arms.(Craft and Smaldone, 2003). In such situations, violent confrontation becomes almost inevitable. This contrasts with the views of some scholars who hold that weapons imports reduce the likelihood of war as groups could be intimidated by the government's arming to seek peace.(Craft, 1999). In addition, the proliferation of SALW has led to arms embargoes and sanctions to some countries by international organisations. UN arms embargoes were imposed on Somalia, the CAR and the DRC for instance, while Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali were sanctioned by ECOWAS following unconstitutional power changes in these countries.

Security related consequences include the rise in conflict-related deaths. The Uppsala

University Conflict Data Program holds that 112.726 battle-related deaths have been recorded in Sub-Saharan Africa as of the year 2022 with Somalia having the lion's share with 101,076 of them (World Bank, 2024). Moreover, SALWs in conflict situations have been used as tool of physical injury, gross human rights violations, sexual and conflict related gender based violence in countries like the DRC as well as the recruitment of children as soldiers. According to UNICEF more than 21.000 children have been verified to have been recruited and used by armed forces and non-state armed groups in West and Central Africa between 2016 and 2021 (UNICEF, 2021). Furthermore, in conflict situations, SALW are used for crime commission and for hostage taking as a means of raising income to finance conflict in countries such as Cameroon and Kenya. A study carried out by the Regional Centre on Small Arms revealed that 1312 kidnappings were carried out with the use of small arms in Kenya between 2010 and 2014.

Social consequences of SALW proliferation in conflicts in Africa include the breakdown of social cohesion as families and societies are torn apart; difficult access to social amenities such as potable water, electricity, education, and health services, which have been destroyed in the course of fighting; forced population displacements and humanitarian crises, as illustrated in the following figure.

Figure 1: New displacements by conflict violence and disasters in Sub-Saharan Africa (2009-2019



Source: The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2020, p.16)

In addition, the presence of SALW causes psychological trauma both on the part of victims of armed violence and repentant perpetrators, besides the fact that they facilitate the development of a culture of violence in the communities in which they are used.

The economic cost of armed conflict in SSA is enormous. This ranges from the destruction of property in the course of armed conflict, through the economic downturn that comes with the diversion of resources meant for development towards the purchase of guns as well as the

underdevelopment that comes with an insecure and violent environment. Financial resources which could otherwise be used for development projects are spent on purchasing weapons. The Central African Republic for instance spent the sum of two hundred and fifty one billion nine hundred and sixty two million (251.962.000.000) FCFA on military expenditure in the year 2022 while Kenya spent one hundred and thirty one billion six hundred and eighty three million (131.683.000.000) Kenyan Shillings. Mali, on its part, spent three hundred and twenty one billion two hundred and thirty-three million (321.233.000.000) FCFA in the same year (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Database). Consequently, between 1990 and 2005, African states spent over 300 billion dollars on armed conflict to the point of equalling the amount received as foreign aid in the same period, with approximately 79% of small arms in the hands of civilians (Fang et al., 2020). Consequently, countries with active violent conflicts have remained underdeveloped as their resources are diverted to arms purchases for purposes of war.

D. Arms governance frameworks in Sub-Saharan Africa.

1. Regulatory frameworks.

Compared to nuclear weapons, SALW governance frameworks in the world are relatively recent. Up until the close of the 20th century, arms governance efforts were mostly directed towards nuclear disarmament. SALW did not receive much attention in spite of the negative consequences they had especially on internal conflicts in sub Saharan Africa, in which they are used as weapons of choice. It was not until 1995 when the General Assembly of the United Nations in paragraph 1 of its resolution 50/70 B of 12 December 1995, entitled "Small arms", requested the Secretary-General to prepare, with the assistance of a group of qualified governmental experts, a report on : a) the types of SALW being used in conflicts being dealt with by the United Nations; b) the nature and causes of the excessive and destabilizing accumulation and transfer of SALW, including their illicit production and trade; and (c) the ways and means to prevent and reduce the excessive and destabilizing accumulation and transfer of these arms in particular as they cause or exacerbate conflict. The report of this panel of experts presented to the General Assembly on August 27, 1997, established the link between violent conflict and SALW proliferation. While insisting that these arms don't cause the conflicts in which they are used, it held that they rather "affect the intensity and duration of violence and encourage militancy rather than a peaceful resolution of unsettled differences."(United Nations, 1997, p.2). The recommendations contained in this report led to the adoption of the Protocol against the Illicit manufacturing of and trafficking in firearms, their parts and components and ammunition also known as the Firearms protocol in May 2001 as the

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first legally binding SALW instrument at the global stage, and the convening of the UN conference on illicit trade in small arms from the 9th to the 20th of july 2001. This conference led to the adoption of the United Nations Program of Action to prevent, combat, and eradicate the illicit trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in all its aspects (PoA). These landmark documents set the basis for SALW governance at the global stage. Pursuant to this, the International Instrument to enable States to Identify and Trace, in a timely and reliable manner, Illicit SALW was equally adopted in 2005, and the Arms Trade Treaty in April 2013.

At the regional level, African States adopted in December 2000, the Bamako Declaration on an African common position on the illicit proliferation, circulation, and trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons, in prelude to the UN SALW conference. This document recognised the devastating consequences of illicit SALW proliferation and the need to address it in a comprehensive, integrated, sustainable, and efficient manner. Furthermore, the African Union elaborated a master road map on practical steps to silence the guns in Africa by the year 2020. This ambitious program, adopted in Lusaka in 2016, was later modified in Johannesburg in 2020 and the timeline was extended to 2030. Its implementation is mostly the job of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in conformity with the principle of subsidiarity that guides the relationship between the UN, the AU, and these sub-regional bodies.

Each of the four regional blocs in SSA has a firearms protocol or convention. In Southern Africa, the Protocol on the control of firearms, ammunition and other related materials in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) was signed in Blantyre in August 2001. In East Africa, the Nairobi Protocol for the prevention, control, and reduction of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Great Lakes Region and the Horn of Africa was adopted in April 2004. Similarly, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, their ammunition and other related materials, was adopted in Abuja in June 2006. Finally, in Central Africa, the Central African Convention for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons, their ammunition and all parts and components that can be used for their manufacture, repair and assembly was adopted by member States of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) in Kinshasa in April 2010.

In the same vein, Sates have adopted national legislation on SALW within their respective territories. These legal frameworks define and categorize firearms and address some related aspects such as ownership, stockpile management, marking, tracing, disposal, transfer, manufacture, record-keeping, collection and destruction, sensitisation and awareness programs, transparency, operational measures, international cooperation, information exchange and coordination. In their implementation, strategies and action plans have been drafted and

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implemented in Kenya, Mali and the CAR. Similarly, National Focal Points or National SALW commissions have been created to champion SALW governance in Kenya, Mali and the CAR. Conversely, Cameroon has neither a SALW strategy nor a national focal point.

2. Operational SALW governance frameworks

Besides these legislative and institutional measures, operational activities have been carried out under the coordination of national focal points or regional organisations. As such, border control activities, sensitisation and awareness -raising campaigns and capacity-building workshops have been organised in the various states. In addition, arms marking, physical security, and stock management programs as well as arms collection and destruction operations, have been organised. Kenya, for instance, destroyed around 23.000 guns between 2016 and 2021 (Owina, 2024), over 6.000 firearms and over 21.000 ammunition destroyed in Mali since 2022, and 1500 weapons destroyed in Cameroon in 2021 within the framework of the African Amnesty month. More recently, 6.000 weapons were destroyed at the Kenyan National Police leadership academy in June 2025 (Okafor, 2025). Similarly, DDR programs are currently being implemented in Cameroon, Mali, and the CAR with mitigated results.

Besides these national efforts, regional institutions like RECSA have been very instrumental in capacity building, record keeping, and the provision of logistics for safekeeping and tracing of SALW, as seen in the following table.

Table 1: Some cooperation activities carried out by RECSA between 2012 and 2025.

Activity	Number
RECSA small arms tracing software installations	18
Arms marking machines	81
Armouries constructed	40
Steel arms boxes provided	1.897
Training Seminars for Security officers on SALW control and management	30
National-level Physical Security and Stock Management trainings	16
Regional-level PSSM Trainings held since 2012.	23
Qualified RECSA-Regional PSSM instructors.	64

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Source: Author's compilation from RECSA website https://www.recsasec.org, accessed on 20/08/2025 at 8:14 PM.

Moreover, peacekeeping missions such as MINUSCA and MINUSMA have equally been of great assistance to Mali and the CAR in their fight against illicit SALW proliferation, especially through funding, capacity building and the provision of logistics such as arms marking machines. Finally, regional bodies have set up joint task forces to fight terrorism and the consequent SALW proliferation. Examples include the Multinational Joint Task force of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (MNJTF) comprising of units from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria with headquarters in N'djamena and the defunct G5 Sahel Joint Force. The newest of these joint military bodies is the Alliance of Sahel States created in September 2023 between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso as a collective defence structure in the fight against terrorism and organised crime.(UN Security Council, 2024). These multinational military operations have resulted in the seizure of illicit SALW. Such was the case with operations GAMA AIKI, from 11th June to 07th October 2016; RAWAN KADA, from 25th January to 25th April 2017; AMNI FAKAT, from the 15th of March to the of 3rd July 2018; YANCIN TAFKI 1 and 2, since 2019, LAKE SANITY 1 in 2023 and LAKE SANITY 2 in 2024, conducted by the MNJTF. In the same vein, an operation conducted by this force from the 2nd to the 24th of December 2021 along the Kamadougou River in the Yobe axis led to the killing of 22 Boko Haram terrorists, the arrest of several suspects, and the destruction of five gun trucks, five motorcycles, and several logistic bunkers, as well as the recovery of eight AK47 rifles. (Onuoha et al., 2023).

E. Appraisal of SALW governance frameworks in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In spite of these governance frameworks and operations, SALWs continue to fuel conflicts in SSA. This situation can be explained by at least three factors: Enforcement remains weak, with most member states lacking the political will, financial resources, or institutional capacity to implement disarmament, marking, tracing, and stockpile management obligations. Moreover, these frameworks largely reproduce state-centric models of arms control- premised on the assumption that the state is both capable of and legitimate in monopolizing violence as theorized by Max Weber. In contexts where state legitimacy is contested, and where non-state actors control significant territory, such as Mali and the CAR, such models often falter.

Moreover, policy responses continue to lean heavily on top-down, prohibition-based frameworks that often struggle in practice. These frameworks treat SALW primarily as contraband to be removed rather than as embedded within complex socio-political economies.

As such they often address only the supply side of the problem ignoring demand-oriented drivers that push people to seek illicit arms. The African Union's Silencing the Guns by 2030 agenda is laudable, but enforcement is uneven and community-level gaps persist. Scholars such as Muggah (2006) have for years urged a shift toward an Armed Violence Reduction agenda — one that rethinks arms control as part of broader governance, development, and security architecture.

In addition, most policy frameworks do not sufficiently regulate the craft production of arms and the conversion of imitation arms. In spite of increasing local arms production capacity in SSA, this domain has largely remained unregulated and understudied. Whereas the fact that locally crafted arms are becoming more performant, sophisticated, and available, justifying their use in armed conflict across the continent, warrants that they should be properly addressed in arms governance frameworks.

Furthermore, arms governance efforts in the case study countries face both structural, regulatory, contextual and operational challenges, amongst which are the absence of adapted specialised institutionsin countries Cameroon and weak institutions in Mali and CAR; difficulties in coordination; poor stock management systems; lack of accountability and poor record keeping; inefficient disarmament programs in Mali, CAR and Cameroon; discrepancies between international and national legislations; technological advancements and the influence of the internet. Besides these, weak and unadapted legislation; unregulated or poorly regulated craft production; poverty and hardship; lack of collaboration from local populations; absence of transparency in arms transactions; insufficient political will of some states; foreign interests and the double standards of arms producers; porous and unmanned national borders; the prevalence of armed conflict; insufficient or unadapted logistics; financial difficulties; insufficient know-how on arms governance and deficiencies in international cooperation etc, also render SALW governance inefficient in SSA.

In sum, the study came up with the following findings:

- Local craft production of arms, which accounts to a non-negligible extent for illicit arms in internal conflicts in SSA, remains largely unregulated or poorly regulated across case study countries.
- Both States and non-state actors are involved in illicit SALW proliferation in SSA. While most States, pursuant to their national defence and security needs, purchase arms legally, others serve as proxies or facilitators of illicit arms transfers, especially to States under UN arms embargoes like the CAR.

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- There exists a direct relationship between SALW proliferation and surges in armed conflict in the case study countries and SSA in general. Although it is agreed that SALW don't cause the conflicts in which they are used, their presence contributes to aggravating their casualty levels, encouraging the resort to violence, and making peaceful means of conflict resolution less likely.
- Regions with advanced international cooperation schemes, such as West and East Africa, have made more progress in arms governance than those where such cooperation is wanting such as the Central African Sub-region. The existence of RECSA, for instance, is a booster to arms governance in the Great Lakes, the Horn of Africa, and bordering states. Kenya and CAR have greatly benefited from this dynamic.
- Current international and national arms governance efforts in SSA mostly dwell on the supply-side of the problem. Consequently, the measures envisaged often focus on prohibition and arms control strategies with very minimal attention given to demand-side drivers such as the motivations for illicit arms possession and misuse. Arms governance frameworks need to address the Human Security needs of the populations inorder to address the factors that push people to demand for firearms, rather than focusing solely on prohibition, regulation and repression.
- State regulation alone cannot ensure effective arms governance. It has to be anchored on broader arms governance schemes that combine both community engagement, international cooperation and technology-driven solutions.
- Countries with specialised SALW institutions are more efficient in coordinating SAW-related activities than countries without these institutions. In Kenya, Mali and the Central African Republic, where national focal points or national SALW commissions exist, many SALW-related activities such as capacity building, sensitisation, arms marking, record keeping, acquisition of logistics, field operations etc have been carried out thanks to the coordination and planning mechanisms put in place by these institutions. Conversely, countries like Cameroon, which do not have a national commission have shown difficulties in coordination. Consequently, the fight against SALW proliferation is carried out by many government departments and forces without any real coordination. The consequences here have been the absence of consolidated SALW data, inability to organise coordinated operations, insufficient capacity building etc.
- The mainstreaming of non-State actors into the fight against SALW proliferation increases the chances of success. In most African societies, allegiance to tribal or ethnic groups is

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often stronger than allegiance to the State, given the sociological and cultural ties that bind members of communities together. These African societies, which are often well structured, have community leaders who wield a lot of power. Mainstreaming these leaders into arms governance frameworks offers invaluable opportunities for sensitisation, intelligence gathering, arms collection, and operational action. The same holds of religious leaders.

- Success in the fight against SALW proliferation in SSA depends largely on the political will of States. This political will determines the resources and energy that will be put into the fight. Consequently, the legal and institutional frameworks, the resources and logistics, international cooperation, the organisation of field operations, capacity building, etc, all depend on the political will of the concerned State. The commitment varies from country to country and from region to region. While such efforts are more visible in Kenya and to a leser extent in Mali and the CAR, much still needs to be done in Cameroon, which neither has a SALW strategy nor a National Focal Point.

Together, the findings reveal that arms proliferation remains a central destabilizing factor, but one that governance reforms can realistically mitigate. This article contends that a new paradigm of arms governance is urgently required for Africa — one that goes beyond state monopoly, integrates community-based strategies, explicitly regulates traditional and artisanal arms production, and harnesses accountability tools like marking, tracing, and regional oversight.

IV. Conclusion

This study has critically examined the enablers and impact of SALW proliferation in internal conflicts across Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), as well as the responses deployed by States and other stakeholders to mitigate this phenomenon. The findings underscore the pressing need for a hybrid, multi-level arms governance model that mainstreams non-state community actors in coordination with governmental structures, thereby placing citizens at the core of interventions aimed at curbing the destabilizing effects of SALW. This multi-level governance approach challenges the notion of the state as the sole locus of authority by demonstrating how decision-making power is increasingly shared across supranational, national, and subnational levels, often with the participation of non-state actors (Hooghe and Marks, 2001). Arms governance will be most effective when multiple, overlapping, and autonomous centres of decision-making operate simultaneously, often cooperating, competing, and learning from one another (Ostrom, 2010).

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Besides this paradigm shift, other structural and operational adjustments need to be made. These range from legal and regulatory reforms that include reinforcing the existing laws by adopting specialised and context-specific legislation which take into consideration the craft production of arms while ensuring reinforced sanctions for non-compliance, to beefing-up the institutional frameworks through the creation and/or reinforcement of existing specialised institutions. These reforms equally include structuring and reinforcing coordination mechanisms, effective DDR schemes and the reinforcement of international cooperation. Besides these structural measures, there is a need to ensure good governance and equitable wealth allocation, capacity building and sensitisation, promotion of peaceful means of conflict resolution and rebuilding the trust of the population in state authorities and institutions. Furthermore, acquiring adapted logistics, multiplying and intensifying field operations, improving stockpile management and record keeping, and reinforcing border surveillance and control are essential operational adjustments for an efficient fight.

While this study does not claim to have exhaustively resolved the complex challenge of SALW proliferation in SSA, it provides a robust analytical foundation for further research focused on enhancing international legal frameworks to integrate demand-side strategies and improve coordination mechanisms for arms control in the region. Significantly, the study highlights local craft production of arms as a critical yet underexplored factor driving SALW proliferation and use. Contemporary governance strategies predominantly target cross-border transfers of conventional arms, often relegating locally manufactured weapons to a secondary concern. While it remains true that the majority of SALW in SSA are imported or illicitly trafficked from abroad, the production, modification, and use of artisanal firearms are steadily rising, producing consequences that are as severe, if not more destructive, than those of conventional arms. This observation positions the study as a starting point for future inquiries into the impact of locally produced SALW on regional conflicts and the development of effective regulatory mechanisms to address this phenomenon.

Furthermore, the study advocates for the institutionalization of peaceful conflict-resolution mechanisms as a strategic alternative to violent confrontation. Expanding research on indigenous and context-specific methods of conflict resolution could significantly advance efforts to “silence the guns” in SSA by offering culturally resonant and locally sustainable pathways to dispute management.

The analysis also emphasizes the centrality of Human Security as a precondition for effective SALW governance. By situating the citizen at the nexus of peace, security, and development, the study illuminates how the protection and empowerment of individuals can create a durable

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foundation for addressing the proliferation of illicit arms. Future research focusing on operationalizing Human Security in conflict-affected contexts could provide actionable frameworks for citizen-centered arms control initiatives.

Finally, the study observes that efforts to combat SALW proliferation in SSA have largely been driven by external actors, including international partners and donor agencies. This reliance raises critical concerns regarding both the political will of African States and the sustainability of interventions in the absence of genuine indigenous ownership and leadership. The overarching question, therefore, remains: Can Sub-Saharan Africa effectively mitigate the impact of the proliferation of illicit SALW in conflicts if it continues to depend on others to pull its chestnuts out of the fire?

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