

## ARMS PROLIFERATION AND THE SPREAD OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS (SALWS) IN WEST AFRICA: A FRUSTRATION–AGGRESSION THEORY ANALYSIS OF REGIONAL INSECURITY DYNAMICS

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### **Abstract**

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) has emerged as a major driver of persistent insecurity across West Africa, where insurgency, terrorism, banditry, and communal conflicts continue to threaten regional stability. Despite numerous security interventions, the widespread availability of illicit weapons has intensified violence and undermined state authority, raising critical concerns about the underlying causes of this insecurity. This study therefore examines the relationship between SALWs proliferation and insecurity in West Africa, with the primary objective of explaining how structural conditions contribute to the escalation of armed violence. Adopting a qualitative research methodology, the study relies on secondary sources, including academic literature, policy reports, and institutional publications. The analysis is anchored on Frustration–Aggression Theory, which provides a framework for understanding how socio-economic and political frustrations arising from poverty, unemployment, inequality, weak governance, and marginalization translate into aggressive and violent behavior when access to weapons is readily available. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to bridging the gap between structural causes of violence and the instrumental role of SALWs in facilitating conflict. Findings reveal that the proliferation of SALWs not only sustains existing conflicts but also lowers the threshold for violence, making it easier for frustrated individuals and groups, particularly youths, to engage in armed aggression. The study concludes that insecurity in West Africa cannot be effectively addressed without simultaneously tackling both the structural roots of frustration and the unchecked spread of weapons. It therefore recommends improved governance, strengthened arms control mechanisms, and enhanced regional cooperation as essential strategies for achieving lasting peace and security.

### **Introduction**

In recent decades, West Africa has increasingly been defined by a complex web of security challenges that continue to undermine peace, development, and state stability. The region has witnessed a troubling rise in insurgency, terrorism, armed banditry, communal violence, and transnational organized crime, all of which have become deeply entrenched in its socio-political landscape. From the jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel to farmer–herder conflicts, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, and criminal banditry in parts of Nigeria, insecurity has assumed multidimensional forms that are both local and transnational in character. A central and recurring factor that underpins these various manifestations of violence is the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs), which has significantly increased the capacity of both state and non-state actors to engage in sustained and lethal conflict (Aning, 2005; Florquin & Berman, 2005; Small Arms Survey, 2020; UNODC, 2021).

SALWs occupy a unique position in the dynamics of contemporary conflict due to their specific characteristics. Unlike heavy weaponry, SALWs are relatively inexpensive, easy to transport, simple to operate, and highly concealable, making them particularly attractive to irregular armed groups, militias, and criminal organizations. Their durability and long lifespan also mean that once introduced into a conflict environment, they tend to remain in circulation for extended periods, often outlasting the conflicts for which they were originally acquired. This has created a situation in which post-conflict societies in West Africa continue to grapple with the residual effects of past wars, as weapons flow from one conflict zone to another, fueling new cycles of violence. The civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, for instance, left behind vast stockpiles of weapons that were never fully recovered, thereby contributing to the regional spread of illicit arms (Florquin & Berman, 2005; Ogaba, 2005; UNIDIR, 2019).

In addition to the legacy of past conflicts, structural weaknesses in state capacity have played a critical role in facilitating the proliferation of SALWs across West Africa. Many countries in the region are characterized by porous borders that are difficult to monitor effectively, allowing for the easy movement of arms across national boundaries. Weak regulatory frameworks, limited enforcement capacity, and corruption within security institutions further compound the problem, enabling illicit arms trafficking networks to operate with relative ease (Aning & Bah, 2011; UNODC, 2021; OECD, 2018). These conditions have transformed West Africa into both a transit and destination hub for illicit weapons, thereby exacerbating existing security challenges.

However, while the availability of SALWs provides the means for violence, it does not, in itself, fully explain the motivations behind such violence. To understand why individuals and groups resort to armed aggression, it is necessary to examine the underlying socio-economic and political conditions that generate grievances. Across

West Africa, high levels of poverty, unemployment, inequality, and social exclusion have created widespread frustration, particularly among the youth population. In many countries, large segments of the population face limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, resulting in a sense of marginalization and disillusionment with the state (World Bank, 2020; UNDP, 2019; Gurr, 1970; Achumba et al., 2013).

These frustrations are often intensified by governance challenges, including corruption, weak institutions, lack of accountability, and ineffective service delivery. When citizens perceive the state as incapable of meeting their basic needs or addressing their grievances, trust in public institutions erodes, creating fertile ground for conflict. In such environments, non-state actors including insurgent groups, militias, and criminal organizations, often exploit these grievances to recruit members and justify violent actions (OECD, 2018; Osimen et al., 2020; Onuoha, 2014). The result is a cycle in which socio-economic deprivation and political exclusion fuel discontent, which in turn increases the likelihood of violent conflict.

Importantly, however, frustration alone does not inevitably lead to violence. Many individuals and communities experience hardship without resorting to aggression. What transforms frustration into violence is the presence of enabling conditions that lower the barriers to aggressive action. In the context of West Africa, the widespread availability of SALWs serves as such an enabling mechanism. By providing easy access to instruments of violence, SALWs reduce the cost and risk associated with engaging in armed conflict, thereby increasing the likelihood that frustrated individuals and groups will resort to aggression.

It is within this context that Frustration–Aggression Theory becomes particularly relevant as an analytical framework. Originally developed by Dollard et al. (1939) and later refined by scholars such as Berkowitz (1969) and Gurr (1970), the theory posits that frustration defined as the blockage of goal-oriented behavior creates a psychological predisposition toward aggression. When individuals are unable to achieve their desired socio-economic or political goals, they may respond with hostility, particularly if they perceive the situation as unjust or illegitimate. However, the expression of this aggression is often contingent upon the availability of means and opportunities.

Applying this theoretical perspective to West Africa, it becomes evident that the interaction between structural frustration and the proliferation of SALWs is central to understanding the region's insecurity. Socio-economic and political conditions generate widespread frustration, while the availability of weapons provides the means to translate that frustration into violent action. In this sense, SALWs function not merely as tools of violence but as critical facilitators that bridge the gap between grievance and aggression.

This paper therefore argues that insecurity in West Africa cannot be fully understood by examining either structural factors or arms proliferation in isolation. Rather, it must be viewed as the outcome of a dynamic interaction between underlying socio-economic frustrations and the widespread availability of SALWs.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

**Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs):** Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) refer to a category of weapons designed for individual or small group use (United Nations, 1997; Small Arms Survey, 2020; Krause, 2002; Muggah, 2012). These include pistols, rifles, assault weapons, machine guns, and grenade launchers. The defining characteristics of SALWs are their portability, ease of use, and accessibility, which make them the most commonly used weapons in contemporary conflicts. Studies have shown that SALWs account for the majority of deaths in modern armed conflicts, particularly in developing regions where regulatory systems are weak.

**Arms Proliferation:** Arms Proliferation refers to the rapid and often uncontrolled spread of weapons, especially through illicit channels (Aning, 2005; Aning & Bah, 2011; Florquin & Berman, 2005; UNODC, 2021). In West Africa, arms proliferation is driven by a combination of internal and external factors, including porous borders, corruption, weak governance structures, and the legacy of past conflicts. The persistence of illegal arms trafficking networks has ensured a steady supply of weapons to non-state actors, thereby sustaining cycles of violence and instability.

**Insecurity:** Insecurity, on the other hand, refers to a condition characterized by fear, instability, and vulnerability arising from threats to life, property, and societal order (Achumba et al., 2013; OECD, 2018; UNDP, 2019; Small Arms Survey, 2020). In the West African context, insecurity manifests in various forms, including terrorism, insurgency, communal violence, and organized crime. The proliferation of SALWs has significantly exacerbated these forms of insecurity by increasing the lethality and frequency of violent conflicts.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Frustration/Aggression Theory offers a robust analytical framework for understanding the linkage between adverse socio-economic conditions and the outbreak of violent behavior. The theory was originally articulated by Dollard et al. (1939), who posited a direct causal relationship between frustration and aggression, arguing that aggression is always the result of frustration and that frustration invariably leads to some form of aggression. In this classical formulation, frustration is defined as the obstruction of goal-directed behavior; when individuals or

groups are prevented from achieving desired economic, social, or political objectives, they experience psychological tension that may manifest in aggressive responses.

However, subsequent scholars refined this deterministic position to better reflect the complexity of human behavior. Berkowitz (1969), in particular, reconceptualized the theory by arguing that frustration does not automatically produce aggression but instead generates a predisposition or readiness for aggressive behavior. According to Berkowitz, the expression of aggression depends on situational cues and enabling conditions, such as the presence of weapons or social norms that legitimize violence. This modification is crucial in explaining why not all frustrated individuals resort to violence, and why aggression tends to occur more frequently in environments where facilitating factors are present.

Building on these insights, Gurr (1970) introduced the concept of relative deprivation, which further deepens the explanatory power of the theory. Relative deprivation refers to the perceived gap between what individuals believe they are entitled to and what they actually receive. It is not absolute poverty alone that generates frustration, but the perception of inequality and injustice relative to others or to one's own expectations. When individuals or groups perceive that they are systematically disadvantaged or excluded from opportunities and resources, feelings of resentment, anger, and frustration intensify, increasing the likelihood of collective violence. This dimension is particularly significant in explaining group-based conflicts and mass mobilization for violent action.

The relevance of Frustration–Aggression Theory to the West African context is evident in the region's prevailing socio-economic and political conditions. Many countries in West Africa are characterized by high levels of poverty, unemployment, income inequality, and limited access to essential social services. These conditions create a persistent sense of frustration among large segments of the population, particularly among youths, who constitute a demographic majority in many states. Youths often face structural barriers to education, employment, and meaningful political participation, which heightens their vulnerability to frustration and disillusionment (Onuoha, 2014; Osimen et al., 2020; Aning & Bah, 2011).

In addition to economic deprivation, governance challenges further exacerbate frustration in the region. Corruption, weak institutions, lack of accountability, and ineffective service delivery undermine public trust in the state and contribute to perceptions of injustice and marginalization (OECD, 2018; UNDP, 2019). When individuals perceive that political systems are unresponsive to their needs or are dominated by elite interests, they are more likely to develop grievances that can fuel aggressive behavior. Gurr's (1970) notion of relative deprivation is particularly applicable here, as many citizens compare their conditions not only to domestic elites but also to global standards, thereby intensifying feelings of exclusion.

Environmental stressors also play a critical role in amplifying frustration. Issues such as climate change, desertification, and resource scarcity have intensified competition over land, water, and other vital resources, particularly in agrarian communities. These pressures often exacerbate existing socio-economic tensions and contribute to conflicts such as farmer–herder clashes, which have become increasingly violent in parts of West Africa (Muggah, 2012; OECD, 2018). In such contexts, frustration is not only economic or political but also ecological, further complicating the dynamics of conflict.

Despite these widespread frustrations, it is important to emphasize that frustration alone does not inevitably lead to violence. Many individuals and communities endure hardship without resorting to aggression. This is where the role of enabling factors becomes critical. The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) provides a key mechanism through which latent aggression can be actualized. The availability of these weapons lowers the barriers to violent action by increasing the capacity of individuals and groups to inflict harm with minimal effort or risk.

From the perspective of Frustration–Aggression Theory, SALWs serve as situational cues and facilitators that make aggressive responses more likely. Berkowitz (1969) emphasized that the presence of weapons can intensify aggressive impulses by signaling the possibility of violence and making it easier to act on those impulses. In West Africa, where SALWs are widely available due to weak regulatory systems and illicit trafficking networks, the threshold for violence is significantly reduced. This creates a volatile environment in which minor disputes can escalate rapidly into armed conflicts.

The interaction between structural frustration and the proliferation of SALWs thus forms a critical nexus in understanding insecurity in West Africa. Socio-economic and political conditions generate widespread grievances, while the availability of weapons provides the means to express those grievances through violence. This interaction not only increases the likelihood of conflict but also intensifies its severity and duration. Armed groups, insurgents, and criminal networks exploit these dynamics by recruiting frustrated individuals and equipping them with weapons, thereby sustaining cycles of violence.

Moreover, the normalization of violence in such environments further reinforces aggressive behavior. As weapons become more accessible and their use more widespread, violence becomes an increasingly accepted means of resolving disputes or pursuing economic and political objectives. This creates a feedback loop in which insecurity

breeds further frustration, which in turn fuels additional violence. Frustration–Aggression Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding both the motivations behind violence and the conditions that facilitate its occurrence in West Africa. It highlights the importance of addressing not only the structural sources of frustration such as poverty, inequality, and political exclusion but also the enabling factors, particularly the proliferation of SALWs.

### **Post-Conflict Weapon Residue and the Continuity of Violence**

One of the most enduring structural drivers of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) proliferation in West Africa is the legacy of past civil wars, particularly in Liberia and Sierra Leone. These conflicts generated massive inflows of weapons that were never fully recovered, disarmed, or destroyed, resulting in a persistent circulation of illicit arms across the region (Florquin & Berman, 2005; Ogaba, 2005; UNIDIR, 2019; Small Arms Survey, 2020). From the perspective of Frustration–Aggression Theory, this residual weapons stock does not directly create aggression but provides the material infrastructure for the expression of aggression when frustration exists. In post-conflict environments, individuals often experience unresolved grievances, including loss of livelihoods, displacement, and psychological trauma. These conditions generate latent frustration, particularly among ex-combatants and unemployed youth. However, it is the continued availability of weapons that transforms this frustration into actionable violence. Thus, the persistence of SALWs acts as a mechanism of conversion, where historical grievances are continuously reactivated into present-day aggression.

### **Weak State Capacity, Porous Borders, and Structural Enablers of Arms Proliferation**

Another critical dimension of SALWs proliferation is the weakness of state institutions, particularly in border management and regulatory enforcement. Porous borders across West African states allow for the uncontrolled movement of illicit arms, while weak surveillance systems and corruption within security agencies further exacerbate the problem (Aning & Bah, 2011; UNODC, 2021; OECD, 2018; Krause, 2002).

Within the Frustration–Aggression framework, weak governance structures contribute indirectly to violence by sustaining environments of insecurity and institutional failure, which deepen public frustration. When citizens perceive the state as incapable of providing security or regulating illegal arms flows, confidence in authority declines. This perceived failure generates psychological and collective frustration, especially among marginalized populations.

Moreover, porous borders not only facilitate arms movement but also enable non-state actors to operate transnationally, escaping state control. This structural weakness ensures that frustration is continuously matched with access to weapons, thereby sustaining cycles of aggression.

### **Socio-Economic Deprivation and the Psychology of Frustration**

Socio-economic conditions in West Africa constitute a central explanatory pillar of Frustration–Aggression Theory. Widespread poverty, unemployment, and inequality create persistent deprivation that affects large segments of the population, particularly youths (World Bank, 2020; UNDP, 2019; Gurr, 1970; Achumba et al., 2013).

According to Gurr's (1970) concept of relative deprivation, it is not only absolute poverty that generates frustration but the perceived gap between expectations and reality. Many young people in West Africa are exposed to global standards of living through media and migration networks, yet lack access to comparable opportunities. This disparity intensifies feelings of exclusion and injustice.

Such frustration becomes a psychological foundation for aggression. However, aggression does not automatically manifest in violence unless enabling conditions exist. In this case, SALWs provide the missing link by lowering the cost of violent expression. Thus, socio-economic deprivation produces emotional readiness for aggression, while weapons determine whether that aggression is expressed physically.

### **Political Exclusion, Governance Failure, and Institutionalized Grievance**

Political marginalization and weak governance further deepen frustration across West Africa. Many citizens, especially youths and minority groups, feel excluded from decision-making processes and denied meaningful participation in governance structures (Onuoha, 2014; Osimen et al., 2020; Aning & Bah, 2011; OECD, 2018).

Frustration–Aggression Theory explains that when legitimate channels for expressing grievances are blocked, individuals are more likely to seek alternative and often violent means of expression. Corruption, lack of accountability, and ineffective service delivery reinforce perceptions of injustice, thereby intensifying collective frustration.

In such contexts, SALWs become instruments of political expression for non-state actors who perceive violence as the only viable method to challenge state authority. The theory thus helps explain why political exclusion is often closely linked to insurgency and armed rebellion in the region.

### **Non-State Armed Actors as Catalysts of Organized Aggression**

Non-state actors such as Boko Haram, armed militias, and criminal organizations play a central role in translating structural frustration into organized violence. These groups strategically exploit socio-economic grievances to recruit members, particularly unemployed and marginalized youths, by offering financial incentives, protection, or ideological justification (Onuoha, 2014; UNODC, 2021; Small Arms Survey, 2020; Ogaba, 2005).

From a theoretical standpoint, these groups act as mobilizing structures of aggression, converting individual frustration into coordinated violent action. SALWs are essential to their operations, enabling them to challenge state authority, control territories, and sustain insurgencies over time.

Frustration–Aggression Theory helps explain why recruitment is effective: individuals experiencing chronic deprivation and exclusion are psychologically predisposed to aggression, and armed groups provide both the justification and the means to act on that aggression.

### **SALWs, Escalation of Violence, and State Fragility**

The widespread availability of SALWs has significantly altered the intensity and duration of conflicts in West Africa. Weapons increase the lethality of violence, making conflicts more destructive and difficult to resolve. As a result, relatively minor disputes can escalate into large-scale armed confrontations.

This escalation contributes to the weakening of state authority, as governments struggle to maintain monopoly over the use of force. Non-state actors, empowered by SALWs, increasingly challenge state institutions, thereby deepening insecurity and institutional fragility.

Within Frustration–Aggression Theory, this represents a feedback loop, where violence generates further frustration among affected populations, especially displaced communities and victims of conflict. This renewed frustration increases the likelihood of further aggression, sustaining cycles of insecurity.

### **Economic and Humanitarian Consequences of Violent Aggression**

The economic and humanitarian consequences of SALWs proliferation are extensive and deeply destabilizing. Economically, insecurity discourages investment, disrupts trade, destroys infrastructure, and diverts state resources from development to security spending (World Bank, 2020; OECD, 2018; UNDP, 2019; Muggah, 2012).

From a theoretical perspective, these consequences intensify frustration, thereby reinforcing the very conditions that generate aggression. As livelihoods are destroyed and poverty deepens, more individuals become susceptible to recruitment into armed groups or participation in violent activities.

Humanitarian impacts include mass displacement, loss of life, and long-term psychological trauma. These conditions further perpetuate cycles of grievance and violence, demonstrating the cyclical nature of Frustration–Aggression Theory in conflict environments.

The interaction between structural conditions (poverty, exclusion, weak governance), historical legacies (post-conflict arms circulation), and enabling mechanisms (SALWs) creates a self-reinforcing cycle of insecurity in West Africa. Frustration–Aggression Theory provides a coherent explanation of this dynamic by showing that while frustration generates the psychological readiness for violence, SALWs provide the physical means through which that violence is actualized.

Thus, insecurity in West Africa is not merely a function of weapon availability or socio-economic deprivation alone, but the convergence of frustration-producing structures and aggression-enabling instruments, which together sustain persistent cycles of conflict and instability.

### **Conclusion**

This study has critically established that the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) is not merely a contributing factor but a central structural driver of persistent insecurity in West Africa. However, taking a firm analytical position, it is clear that SALWs alone do not generate violence; rather, they function as an enabling mechanism that transforms deep-seated socio-economic and political frustrations into organized and sustained aggression. In this regard, Frustration–Aggression Theory provides a compelling explanation by demonstrating that insecurity in the region is fundamentally rooted in the interaction between systemic deprivation and the availability of instruments of violence.

The evidence presented shows that widespread poverty, unemployment, inequality, and political exclusion create enduring conditions of frustration among large segments of the population, particularly the youth. Yet, it is the accessibility of SALWs that converts these grievances into active violence, lowering the threshold for aggression and intensifying the scale and lethality of conflicts. From this standpoint, insecurity in West Africa is not accidental but structurally produced through a reinforcing cycle in which deprivation generates frustration, and weapons facilitate its violent expression.

Therefore, any attempt to address insecurity in West Africa that focuses solely on disarmament or military responses without addressing underlying socio-economic injustices will remain fundamentally inadequate.

Likewise, development interventions that ignore the pervasive circulation of SALWs will fail to achieve sustainable peace. The real challenge lies in the dual necessity of transforming structural conditions that generate frustration while simultaneously disrupting the networks that supply and sustain illicit arms flows. The persistence of insecurity in West Africa reflects a deeper systemic failure that links governance deficits, socio-economic exclusion, and weak arms control regimes. A meaningful resolution requires a shift from reactive security measures to preventive structural reforms, where human security, inclusive governance, and strict arms regulation are pursued as integrated components of regional stability.

## Recommendations

### 1. Strengthening Arms Control Policies and Enforcement

Governments in West Africa should reinforce arms control laws and ensure strict enforcement mechanisms to effectively curb the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) across the region.

### 2. Improvement of Border Security and Regional Cooperation

Border security systems should be upgraded through advanced surveillance technologies, intelligence sharing, and stronger regional collaboration to reduce the illegal cross-border movement of weapons.

### 3. Promotion of Good Governance and Institutional Accountability

West African states must promote transparency, accountability, and good governance in order to reduce corruption, enhance institutional effectiveness, and rebuild public trust in state authority.

### 4. Implementation of Socio-Economic Reforms

Governments should prioritize job creation, poverty reduction, and youth empowerment programmes as key strategies for addressing structural frustration and reducing vulnerability to violent recruitment.

### 5. Strengthening Regional and International Partnerships

Regional organizations such as ECOWAS should strengthen existing arms control and conflict prevention frameworks, while international partners should provide technical and financial support for capacity-building initiatives aimed at improving security management across West Africa.

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