

Porous Borders, Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation and Human Security in Africa

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With 109 international boundaries and a coastline measuring about 39,000 kilometers, Africa remains very vulnerable to illegal transnational trafficking flows that threaten national and regional security. These include, but are not limited to drug trafficking, human smuggling, small arms and light weapons (SALWs) trafficking, cross-border banditry, illegal migration, counterfeiting in medicine and currency, illegal dumping of toxic wastes, and maritime piracy. The dynamics of these illegal transnational flows has significantly undermined sustainable peace and democratic development within and across African states, measured in terms of the capacity of states to promote human security. Of particular concern is the increased proliferation of SALWs in the continent, facilitated through its porous international maritime and land borders. Out of approximately 500 million illicit weapons in circulation worldwide in 2004, it was estimated that about 100 million are in sub-Saharan Africa, with more than half of these in the hands of non-state actors and criminal groups. With highly permeable borders, ungoverned spaces, recurrent internal crisis, and ineffectual national security systems, SALWs now penetrate and circulate in Africa more easily than ever. Its easy availability has become a key enabler of criminal victimization of individuals, groups and communities within and across African states. The paradox however is that while arms can freely move across African borders, legitimate goods are subjected to specious red tape. Thus, it takes an estimated average of 40 paper documents and 200 data elements to undertake one customs transactions across an African border while it only takes one day to clear a customs in Estonia, it takes 30 days on average to clear customs in an African country. The objectives of this paper therefore are to critically examine how Africa's problematic border interacts with the internal political economy dynamics of Africa states to stoke alarming proliferation of SALWs, unravel the specificity of its impact on human security across the sub regions, and evaluate the efficacy of major initiatives adopted by African states to address the SALWs problematic. It maintains that although African states have adopted several measures to address the SALWs challenge, such efforts have failed to strike a sound balance between the demand and supply dynamics of arms proliferation. The article concludes that African states can better combat the proliferation of SALWs in the continent if they adopt robust interventions that deepen good governance, strengthen inter- and intra-state security mechanisms, and leverages constructive diplomatic engagement with extra-regional powers.