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“Achieving SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) in line with the 2030 United Nations agenda.”



Committee: DISEC

Agenda Item: Addressing the proliferation of small arms and light weapons to decrease violence and support peaceful societies. (SDG Target 16.4)

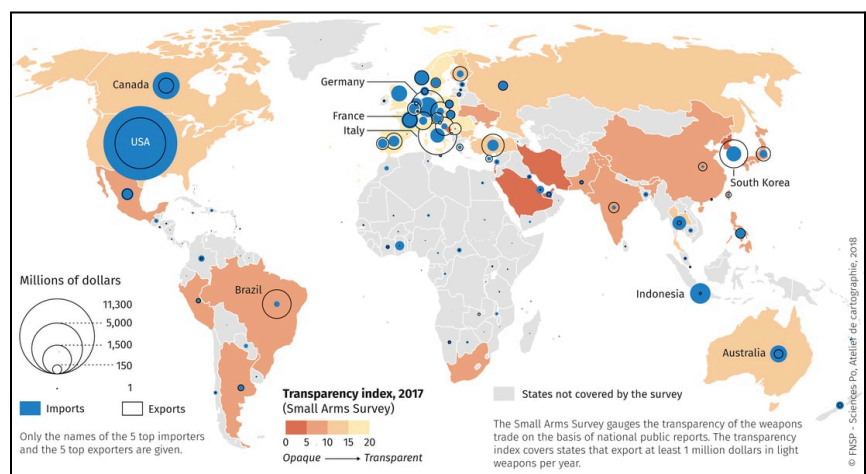
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Introduction

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) is one of the main issues that directly concerns the international community to this day (*UNODA, 2023*). SALW has shown itself as a direct threat on worldwide peace, security, and development. Both armed and non-conflict situations can take advantage of the properties of SALW such as; low price, longevity, ease to conceal and carry. These features allow SALW to be traded and carried a lot both within and across borders, often even moving from legal possession to illegal markets which can happen due to diversion, theft, or a lack of regulations (*“Small Arms Trade,” 2024; IANSA and IPIS, 2022*). Resultingly, SALW are still causing armed violence in places where wars have officially ended. (*Small Arms Survey, 2024*).

The uncontrolled spread of SALW has had massive negative consequences for state stability and public security across the globe, most significantly being an issue in post-war states or



those riddled with terrorism and crime groups. (*“Small Arms Trade,”* 2024; *IANSA and IPIS,* 2022)

In post-conflict regions, the presence of illicit arms has reversed disarmament and reintegration by causing constant instability (*Small Arms Survey, 2024*). In areas with persisting conflict, these arms have caused ceasefires to be broken, due to misunderstandings caused by the individual use of SALW unrelated to the actual conflicting sides (*Saferworld, 2017*). The reduction of illicit SALW flows as one of the main strategies to bring an end to arms proliferation is included in the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development SDG 16, specifically Target 16.4. It calls for a dramatic reduction in the illegal arms trade as a way to prevent violence and facilitate the establishment of peaceful and inclusive societies. Despite the efforts of international frameworks dealing with SALW today, their persistent insufficiency and uneven implementation renders them effectively obsolete. This indicates the need for strengthened international cooperation, enforcement, and commitment.

Definition of Significant Terms

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)

SALW are weapons designed for individual or small-group use, including firearms such as pistols, rifles, assault rifles, and light machine guns, also including less commonly seen portable weapons such as grenade launchers and man-portable air-defense systems. SALW stand out with their ease of use, transportability, and long operational lifespan. (*UNIDIR, 2009; Small Arms Survey, 2024*)

Illicit Arms Trade

Illicit arms trade refers to the transfer, manufacture, or possession of weapons in violation of national laws or international agreements. These include illegal cross-border transfers and diversion from legal markets. (*ResearchGate, 2015; "Small Arms Trade," 2024*)

Arms Proliferation

The spread and growth in the accumulation of weapons within and across states through both legal and illegal means, often resulting in the circulation of arms beyond effective state control. (*UNODA, 2026; ResearchGate, 2015*)

Diversion

The redirection of legally produced or transferred weapons, usually with clear serial numbers or other means of identification into unauthorized users or illicit markets, often due to theft, corruption or weak export controls. (*ResearchGate, 2015; Small Arms Survey, 2024*)

Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR)

DDR are processes implemented in post-conflict settings to reduce armed violence through the collection of weapons, disbandment of armed groups, and reintegration of former combatants into civilian life.

Transparency in Arms Transfers

The extent to which states report and disclose information regarding the production, export, and import of weapons, contributing to accountability and the prevention of illicit arms flows.

Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16)

A goal under the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development that seeks to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, ensure access to justice, and build effective, accountable institutions.

United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons (PoA)

A politically binding framework adopted in 2001 aimed at preventing, combating, and eradicating the illicit trade in SALW through national measures, international cooperation, and improved stockpile management. (*Small Arms Survey, 2024*)

Arms Trade Treaty (ATT)

A legally binding international treaty regulating the international trade of conventional arms, including SALW, with the objective of reducing illicit transfers and preventing arms from contributing to armed conflict or human rights violations. (*UNODA, 2026*)

Stockpile Management

The secure storage, monitoring, and disposal of weapons and ammunition held by state authorities to prevent loss, theft, and diversion into illicit markets.

Marking and Tracing

Mechanisms used to identify weapons through unique markings and to track their movement from manufacture to end use, particularly in investigations of illicit arms trafficking.

End-User Certification

Official documentation provided by importing states confirming the final recipient and intended use of transferred weapons, designed to reduce the risk of diversion.

Detailed Background of the Issue

Emergence of Small Arms and Light Weapons as a Global Security Concern

During a significant part of the Cold War, global arms control efforts were aimed at weapons of mass destruction and heavy arms due to the much more devastating risks they carried. Small arms and light weapons (SALW) remained under national control. (*"Naj01," 2026*)

Nevertheless, the grounds for armed conflict underwent a substantial shift towards the end of the twentieth century, with intra-state conflicts becoming the larger source of violence, overtaking interstate conflicts. It was during this era that SALW came to be recognized as the most significant means of warfare, being responsible for the highest number of conflict-related deaths, especially among the civilians. (*Small Arms Survey, 2024*) The small size and longevity of SALW, made it possible for guns manufactured decades back to be hidden in storages after the end of wars and brought back to use by organized crime groups and terror organizations thus,

contributing to the continuation of violence even after the formal cessation of hostilities. *(UNIDIR, 2009)*.

The large surplus of weapons that were no longer needed due to the end of the Cold War and military stockpiles being downsized or not adequately secured, caused the influx of arms into the market. Regions such as Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and West Africa, were affected as arms got into illegal markets and this further weakened the local governments, the police force, and thereby the conflict in the region *(UNIDIR, 2009)*. The rampant distribution of SALW not only indicated the existence of international regulatory failures but also pointed out the lack of an all-encompassing global regulatory system concerning their transfer and control. *(ResearchGate, 2015)*

Mechanisms of Proliferation and Illicit Circulation

Small arms and light weapons (SALW) proliferation is a phenomenon that takes place both through legal and illegal means, where sometimes, due to diversion, the two channels meet. The weapons could be legally produced and passed on but later on ceased to be legally used as a result of poor export controls, counterfeit end-user documents, bribery, or lack of supervision. Inadequate management of stockpiles has also been around when talking about causes as insufficient storage areas and poor record-keeping make theft and leakage easier. In post-war areas, for instance, arms collected during the disarmament process sometimes have ended up back in circulation due to the lack of monitoring. *(IANSA and IPIS, 2022)*

The transnational trafficking networks greatly aggravate the situation by taking advantage of the countries' border weaknesses and the differences in their laws. Generally, these networks do not operate alone but rather alongside other forms of organized crime, thus creating a stronger demand for illegal weapons and making it even harder to enforce the law. Consequently, SALW are constantly found moving from one region to another thus, separating the production site from the usage location (*"Small Arms Trade," 2024*).

Regional Impact and Patterns of Violence

Even though the spread of SALW is a global issue, the impacts are most striking in areas where armed conflicts are going on, there is no governance or organized crime is present on a large scale. In some African countries, ammunition and arms from previous wars have played a major role in the security situation, and the areas have already been made difficult for other activities such as post-conflict recovery. In the case of Latin America, the presence of illegal guns has been a direct relation to the increase in urban violence and murder. On the other hand, the routes used for smuggling in the Middle East and North Africa have made it easier to move weapons among the countries, thus increasing the instability in the area. (*UNODA, 2026*).

More importantly, the supply chains that support the regional impacts are more associated with international sources than manufacturing within the country. This situation speaks of the global character of SALW proliferation and the joint obligation of countries involved in exporting, transferring, and importing the weapons.

Development of International Responses

The late 1990s saw a growing international-focus due to recognition of the humanitarian and security implications of SALW proliferation. This was reflected in the setting up of the United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons in 2001, which prescribed voluntary measures for the easy and effective prevention and control of the illegal trade in SALW. The concern over unregulated arms transfers still persisted, leading to the organization of the Arms Trade Treaty, the world's first legally binding pact to monitor the legal flow of all conventional arms, including SALW.

Nevertheless, there are still problems with implementation, transparency, and international cooperation among the stakeholders involved in these frameworks. It is for this reason that the issue of illicit SALW has not only remained but has actually been highlighted, hence its inclusion in the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development. (*United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, 2026*).

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Description of Event
Late 1980s – Early 1990s	End of the Cold War leads to the release of large surplus military stockpiles. Inadequate stockpile management and arms control contribute to the spread of small arms and light weapons into illicit markets, particularly in post-conflict regions.
1990s	Intra-state conflicts become more prevalent than interstate wars. Small arms and light weapons emerge as the primary tools of violence, causing high civilian casualties and drawing international attention to gaps in existing arms control mechanisms.
2001	Adoption of the United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons, marking the first global framework aimed at preventing, combating, and eradicating the illicit trade in SALW.
2005	Entry into force of the UN Firearms Protocol , supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and addressing the illicit manufacturing and trafficking of firearms.

2013	The Arms Trade Treaty is adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, establishing global standards for the international trade of conventional arms, including SALW.
2014	The Arms Trade Treaty enters into force, becoming legally binding for States Parties and strengthening international efforts to regulate arms transfers and reduce diversion.
2015	Adoption of the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development , including Sustainable Development Goal 16 and Target 16.4, which calls for a significant reduction in illicit arms flows.
2010s–Present	Continued concern over illicit SALW proliferation due to persistent conflicts, organized crime, and uneven implementation of international frameworks, reinforcing the relevance of SALW control within disarmament and development agendas.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

United States

Well known as one of the world's largest producers and exporters of small arms and light weapons, the United States plays a significant role in shaping global arms trade practices. Although at times it has expressed readiness to support international initiatives aimed at

eliminating the illegal arms trade, it still sticks to its priorities of national sovereignty and domestic control which in turn, has a great impact on its stance on international regulations.

Russian Federation

The Russian Federation is one of the biggest exporters of small arms and light weapons, mostly exporting to regions experiencing ongoing security challenges. It has generally emphasized state centered approaches to arms control and has shown concerns regarding external interference in national arms transfer decisions.

China

China is not only a producer but also a buyer of SALW and has supported international cooperation on arms control while prioritizing sovereignty. Its position often highlights the importance of national responsibility rather than intrusive international verification mechanisms.

France and The United Kingdom

Both France and the United Kingdom are large arms exporters. They have supported transparency measures and the implementation of international agreements regulating SALW transfers.

Germany

Germany is known for its very strict export control policies and emphasis on transparency in arms transfers. It has played a huge role in promoting responsible arms trade practices within both regional and international frameworks.

Brazil

Brazil both produces small arms and is a country significantly affected by issues stemming from it. It has supported international efforts to address illicit arms flows while emphasizing the link between SALW proliferation and domestic security challenges.

United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA)

UNODA coordinates international efforts on disarmament, including the implementation of the UN Programme of Action on SALW and provides technical assistance and reporting mechanisms to Member States.

Small Arms Survey

An independent research organization based in Geneva, the Small Arms Survey provides data and analysis on SALW production, transfers, and impacts, informing policy discussions and international decision making.

INTERPOL

INTERPOL promotes collaboration between police departments worldwide in the fight against illegal arms trade through sharing information, tracing methods, and training programs.

European Union

The European Union has established a uniform set of criteria regarding arms sales and their transparency and is a major factor in encouraging the unison of export controls among its nations

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

ECOWAS has introduced various international policies related to the prevention of SALW dispersal that not only enhance the coordination of the member countries that suffer the most from the illegal arms trade but also provide support to them.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons (PoA) (UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, 2001)

The UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons (PoA), which was passed in 2001, is the most prominent worldwide regulation that deals with the spread of small arms and

light weapons. The PoA is a tool with political binding, encouraging Member States to strengthen their national legislation, enhance the management of stockpiles, improve marking and tracing systems, and increase cooperation between countries. Additionally, it introduces a review process through the biennial meetings and review conferences where the states are allowed to evaluate the progress made and to exchange best practices. Even though the PoA has played a vital role in establishing communications and developing capabilities, its lack of legal binding and the variation in its implementation have marked its overall impact.

International Tracing Instrument (ITI)

(UN General Assembly, 2005)

To assist in the implementation of the PoA, the ITI was approved in 2005 to increase collaboration in the identification and tracing of illegal SALW. The ITI sets out the minimum requirements for marking firearms and for handling tracing requests between countries. Its effectiveness, however, is largely determined by the reporting habits and technical ability of the individual countries, though it has led to better technical cooperation in certain areas.

UN Firearms Protocol

(Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 2001; entered into force 2005)

The illicit production and illegal trading of firearms are the issues that the UN Firearms Protocol, which is a supplement to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime puts an

emphasis on cooperation among the criminal justice systems and includes various activities such as marking, record-keeping, and information exchange as well as criminalization. Nevertheless, its scope is mainly restricted to transnational organized crime and thus does not deal comprehensively with all the issues concerning the proliferation of SALW.

Arms Trade Treaty

(UN General Assembly, 2013; entered into force 2014)

The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) is the very first global legally binding framework that regulates conventional arms including SALW international trade. It obligates the States Parties to evaluate the risks involved with the arms exports, especially concerning the possible use in armed conflicts, organized crimes, or violations of international humanitarian law. Although it has a legal status, the ATT stills challenges from the low universality of participation and different countries' national interpretations of treaty obligations which are impacting its effectiveness in total.

Biennial Meetings of States on the Programme of Action (BMS)

(United Nations, ongoing since 2003)

Through the Biennial Meetings of States, the national implementations of the PoA are continued to be reviewed, with a lot of exchanging of best practices and the growing problems regarding SALW proliferation discussed. The meetings provide a platform for discussions and cooperation

in technical aspects but lack in coming up with outcomes that are binding. Their success relies on the level of national reporting and the continuous political engagement.

Alternative Solutions

A very suitable method to restrict the excessive number of small arms and light weapons is to help in the implementation of existing international frameworks at a national level. Even though the Programme of Action and the Arms Trade Treaty are tools that give guidelines and obligations, their effectiveness is reliant on domestic legislation, enforcement capacity, and political will. Revamping national legal frameworks, especially in the context of export licensing, record-keeping, and penalties for illicit trade, could lead to better compliance without the need of new treaties being created.

On the other hand, the international cooperation on marking, tracing, and information-sharing has been increased as another measure. The improved interoperability of national databases and the greater collaboration of customs, law enforcement, and border authorities might help in minimizing the flow of legally transferred weapons into illegal markets. This could be done through providing technical assistance and training programs, particularly to states that do not have much institutional capacity.

Another area of action is the improved stockpile management that calls for enhanced measures. Setting up secure storage facilities, conducting regular audits, and the proper disposal of surplus or obsolete weapons can greatly reduce the probability of state arsenals getting mixed up with

unauthorized and illegal possession. International assistance programs can support such efforts in the form of financial, technical, and monitoring mechanisms that are specifically designed to meet the needs of the respective country.

Addressing the demand side of SALW proliferation may also lead to long-term reductions in armed violence. This involves integrating SALW control into wider development and peacebuilding strategies, such as post-conflict reconstruction, security sector reform, and community-based violence reduction initiatives. Strengthening trust in public institutions and the rule of law may make people less dependent on weapons for personal or group security.

Moreover, enhancing international transparency and reporting practices could facilitate accountability. Continuous reporting on arms transfers and implementation measures might reveal the gaps, enhance the confidence of the states, and contribute to evidence-based decision-making in the current multilateral frameworks.

Useful Links

- SDG16 Now:

<https://sdg16now.org/report/target16-4/>

- International Peace Bureau:
<https://ipb.org/small-arms-and-light-weapons/>
- UN PoA:
<https://www.unrcpd.org/conventional-weapons/poa/>
- UN RES 56/24:
<https://docs.un.org/en/a/res/56/24>
- UN RES 60/81:
<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Arms%20A%20RES%2060%2081.pdf>
- UN RES 67/234:
<https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/67/234%20B>
- UN RES 74/17:
<https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/74/17>

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