

# Study Group on Illicit Trades

*Safeguarding Human Security from*

*Illicit Arms Trafficking Worldwide*

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# *Safeguarding Human Security from Illicit Arms Trafficking Worldwide*

## **Abstract**

*This paper studies the global problem of illicit arms trafficking and its repercussions on human security. It examines the historical context, actors, and methods associated with this problem, illustrating its pervasive nature. Illicit arms trafficking endangers human security across multiple dimensions, affecting personal, economic, and political security. Vulnerable groups, such as women, children, displaced persons, and marginalized communities, face heightened risks. The paper explores international responses to arms trafficking, focusing on United Nations initiatives. It highlights challenges and calls for strengthened global regulations. Finally, the paper offers a set of interrelated policy recommendations, emphasizing arms control, international cooperation, and education.*

## **Keywords**

*Illicit arms trafficking, human security, small arms, terrorism, organized crime, international cooperation, international law*

## **1. Introduction**

This working paper explores the pressing problem of illicit arms trafficking and its impact on human security. Illicit arms trafficking, especially the illegal trade in small arms and light weapons, is a global concern with troublesome and far-reaching implications. It encompasses unauthorized or illegal transfers of firearms, ammunition, explosives, and related materials at domestic level or across international borders. This paper explores the actors involved, global scale, and methods employed in the trade of illicit arms, attempting to provide a foundational understanding of this issue.

Examining the intersection of illicit arms trafficking and human security, the paper studies the serious threats posed to individuals and communities. Indeed, the impact of arms trafficking extends across various dimensions of human security (Blanton, 2001), from personal and community security to economic, food, health, environmental, and political security. The paper particularly highlights the vulnerabilities of certain groups, including women, children, displaced persons, and marginalized communities, to the consequences of arms trafficking.

The international community's role in addressing this issue is discussed, with a focus on United Nations initiatives. The paper emphasizes challenges in the fight against illicit arms trafficking, examines evolving strategies and calls for strengthening international regulations.

Finally, this paper offers outlines a series of policy recommendations, which include arms control measures, international cooperation, education, and awareness campaigns. By implementing these recommendations, nations and international bodies can work together to reduce the impact of arms trafficking on human security and contribute to a safer world for all.

## **2. Understanding Illicit Arms Trafficking**

Illicit arms trafficking, a pervasive global issue, fuels conflicts, supports criminal enterprises, and poses significant threats to human security (Stohl, 2004). This section attempts to shed light on the actors involved, the global scale, and the methods and routes employed in the trade of illicit arms.

Illicit arms trafficking, often referred to as the illegal trade in small arms and light weapons, encompasses the unauthorized or illegal transfer of firearms, ammunition, explosives, and related materials across international and domestic borders. It covers a wide range of activities, from smuggling handguns across national borders to trafficking in heavy weaponry, often with grave consequences for individuals and societies alike. Of course, arms trafficking is not a new phenomenon; it has plagued humanity for centuries and historical accounts reveal the use of illicit arms to fuel conflicts, revolutions, and wars (Grant, 2015). Over time, this underground trade has evolved and adapted to changing geopolitical landscapes and advancements in technology.

The scope of illicit arms trafficking is staggering, with estimates suggesting that 'the illegal firearms trade generates between EUR 125 million to EUR 236 million per year globally, which represents between 10 to 20 % of the total trade in legal firearms' (European Commission, 2013). The illicit trade transcends national boundaries, connecting various regions and actors. The diversity of arms involved, ranging from small arms and light weapons to heavy artillery, underscores its global reach. Illicit arms trafficking involves various actors, from transnational criminal organizations to state actors and non-state actors, including terrorist groups. Criminal enterprises capitalize on the demand for arms, while political conflicts and terrorism find sustenance in the ready availability of weapons.

Arms traffickers employ various methods to elude detection and move weapons from source to destination. These methods include concealment in legitimate cargo shipments, disassembly and smuggling in parts, and the exploitation of porous borders. Since illicit arms trafficking is a profit-generating criminal activity, arms traffickers attempt to launder their proceeds and re-introduce them to the legal economy (Pavlidis, 2022).

### **3. Human Security: Concepts and Dimensions**

The concept of human security refers to the protection and well-being of individuals and communities. At its core, human security is an approach that prioritizes the protection of individuals and communities from various threats, both traditional and non-traditional. It extends beyond state security and emphasizes the well-being and dignity of people. This definition highlights the importance of safeguarding individuals from violence, poverty, disease, and environmental hazards.

Human security consists of several interrelated dimensions (Alkire, 2003), each of which is crucial for maintaining the overall security and well-being of individuals and communities:

- **Economic Security:** This dimension addresses economic stability, access to livelihoods, and the eradication of poverty. It is essential for reducing vulnerabilities that may drive individuals into illicit activities, including arms trafficking.

- **Food Security:** Ensuring a consistent and nutritious food supply is fundamental to human security. Food insecurity can lead to social unrest and violence, indirectly contributing to arms trafficking.

- **Health Security:** The availability of healthcare and protection from diseases, both infectious and non-communicable, is a critical component of human security. Armed conflict and arms trafficking can exacerbate health crises.

- **Environmental Security:** Protecting the environment and addressing environmental degradation are vital to human security. Environmental changes can lead to resource scarcity and conflicts, which, in turn, drive arms trafficking.

- **Personal Security:** This dimension focuses on the protection of individuals from physical violence, including violence resulting from the proliferation of illicit arms.

- **Community Security:** Strong and cohesive communities are essential for human security. Arms trafficking can undermine community security by fostering violence and instability.

- **Political Security:** A stable political environment, protection of human rights, and good governance are vital for human security. Illicit arms trafficking often finds fertile ground in areas with weak governance and political instability.

These dimensions are interconnected. For example, an armed conflict can lead to food and health insecurity, while environmental degradation can contribute to conflicts. Furthermore, certain groups are more vulnerable to the consequences of illicit arms trafficking, such as women, children, displaced persons, and marginalized communities.

#### **4. The Impact of Illicit Arms Trafficking on Human Security**

Illicit arms trafficking directly impacts various dimensions of human security. It is often responsible for the widespread availability of small arms and light weapons. This leads to localized conflicts, making it easier for disputes to escalate into violence (Wezeman, 2003). Understanding the role of small arms in violence is crucial. Illicit arms are a primary catalyst for armed conflicts and civil wars worldwide. These conflicts disrupt entire regions, displace communities, and lead to severe human rights violations. Individuals living in conflict zones or areas with high levels of armed violence experience profound threats to their personal security. This may involve physical harm, displacement, trauma, and the violation of basic human rights.

Moreover, illicit arms trafficking may fuel the operations of terrorist organizations (Clarke, 2020). It allows these groups to carry out acts of violence, exert control, and threaten the security of individuals and communities. Terrorist groups and extremists using illicit arms can destabilize entire communities and nations. Indeed, the effects of terrorism are significant on different dimensions of human security, especially in regions plagued by terrorist activities.

Illicit arms trafficking is closely tied to organized crime networks (Davis, Hirst and Mariani, 2001). It aids in the expansion of criminal enterprises, which can result in significant threats to economic and political stability. This also has an impact on economic and political stability of affected regions. Corruption, extortion, and insecurity are among the problems that are associated with this.

#### **5. International Efforts to Combat Illicit Arms Trafficking**

The fight against illicit arms trafficking is not limited to national borders; it demands a concerted global effort (Efrat, 2012). Several international initiatives and mechanisms have been proposed to combat the proliferation of illicit arms.

The United Nations has played a significant role in coordinating international efforts to combat illicit arms trafficking. The UN's Programme of Action on small arms and its International Tracing Instrument, have attempted to address this issue. Under

the Programme, governments engage in cooperation and assistance, to improve national small arms laws, import/export controls, and stockpile management. From its part the 2005 International Tracing Instrument (ITI) requires States to ensure that weapons are properly marked and that records are kept, while improving weapons tracing is now part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Additionally, the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) stands out as a crucial international instrument (Lustgarten, 2015). The ATT aims to regulate the international trade in conventional arms, ensuring that arms exports do not lead to human rights violations, conflicts, or the illicit arms market. Its impact has been evident in cases where nations have suspended arms sales to countries involved in human rights abuses, but its success hinges on universal adherence and effective enforcement.

Beyond the United Nations, regional and bilateral agreements play a pivotal role in addressing arms trafficking. In Europe, for example, the European Union has taken notable steps, including the European Firearms Directive (Directive 2021/555, OJ L 115/1), to establish stricter controls on firearms acquisition and possession, as well as enhance cooperation among member states (Kirst, 2019). These efforts aim to prevent weapons from falling into the wrong hands and to trace their origins. Similar measures are implemented in other regions worldwide.

In Africa, regional organizations like the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have undertaken initiatives to combat arms trafficking. Initiatives such as the African Union's African Standby Force and ECOWAS's Moratorium on Import, Export, and Manufacture of Light Weapons are in the right direction for curbing the illicit arms trade. Joint actions and peacekeeping missions have attempted to reduce violence and insecurity in conflict-ridden areas.

While international and regional efforts have led to positive outcomes, persistent challenges remain. One of the most substantial ones is the lack of enforcement of existing agreements and regulations. The vast and often porous borders in conflict-prone regions facilitate the movement of illicit arms, making it difficult to intercept shipments effectively. Corruption within governments and law enforcement agencies further exacerbates the problem. The illicit arms trade operates in a complex network, involving various actors, from rogue states and terrorists to organized criminal groups, rendering it challenging to dismantle.

Strategies for addressing illicit arms trafficking are evolving. Technology is increasingly being utilized for tracking weapons, with advancements in marking and tracing systems aiding in the identification of the origin of arms. Information sharing among nations and intelligence agencies is becoming more efficient, helping to intercept arms shipments and disrupt trafficking networks.

Calls for strengthening international and regional regulations have grown louder. The dynamic nature of the arms trafficking problem necessitates the development of a more comprehensive and adaptable international framework. This involves addressing emerging threats, such as the online arms trade and the use of 3D printing to produce firearms (Banerjee, 2018). By reinforcing international agreements, closing legal loopholes, and promoting cooperation among nations, the global community can

more effectively combat illicit arms trafficking and mitigate its impact on human security.

## **6. Policy Recommendations**

Addressing the grave challenge of illicit arms trafficking and its corrosive impact on human security necessitates a cohesive policy approach. We present a series of interconnected policy recommendations that include international cooperation, arms control measures, public awareness campaigns, and efforts to tackle the root causes of conflict and instability.

Strengthening arms control measures is a fundamental step in curbing illicit arms trafficking. Countries should bolster their commitment to international arms trade regulations, notably the ATT. This entails rigorous monitoring of arms exports, ensuring arms do not end up in the hands of unauthorized actors, and preventing diversion into illicit markets. Furthermore, enhancing transparency and accountability in the arms trade process is crucial. Governments should provide comprehensive data on arms imports and exports, making the entire process more transparent. Tracking arms from their source to their destination can help deter illicit trafficking and improve accountability.

Encouraging information sharing and intelligence collaboration among nations is a powerful tool. This collaborative approach can significantly contribute to intercepting illicit arms shipments and dismantling trafficking networks. Cross-border law enforcement cooperation should also be fostered. Joint operations and coordinated efforts can disrupt trafficking routes and apprehend the criminals involved in arms trafficking more effectively.

To raise public awareness about the dangers of illicit arms trafficking, governments and non-governmental organizations should launch public awareness campaigns. These campaigns should educate communities about the human security consequences of arms trafficking, emphasizing the importance of reporting suspicious activities. Community-based programs should be developed to engage local populations in efforts to prevent arms trafficking. These initiatives can include arms collection programs and outreach to youth at risk of being recruited into the illicit arms trade.

Addressing the root causes of conflict and instability is very important in reducing the demand for arms and curbing illicit trafficking. Conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives should be a priority, aiming to tackle the underlying causes of conflict. This involves diplomatic solutions, reconciliation, and long-term stability. Moreover, it is important to promote economic and social development in conflict-affected areas. By reducing poverty and addressing inequality, the appeal of armed groups and criminal organizations can be diminished. Investing in the rule of law and good governance is another key aspect of addressing arms trafficking. Corruption and state complicity in trafficking can be countered by strengthening judicial systems, implementing anti-corruption measures, and promoting accountable governance (Perlo-Freeman, 2018).



Lastly, offering international assistance to regions affected by illicit arms trafficking is critical. Providing technical and financial support to these regions can enhance their capacity for arms control, law enforcement, and conflict resolution. Humanitarian support should also be extended to populations impacted by armed conflicts, including refugees and internally displaced persons. Addressing the immediate needs of affected communities is paramount for their security and well-being.

These policy recommendations do not operate in isolation. Instead, they form an interconnected web, reinforcing each other. Combating illicit arms trafficking requires a global effort involving nations, international organizations, and civil society. By implementing a combination of arms control measures, international cooperation, education and awareness campaigns, and addressing the root causes of conflict and instability, a comprehensive and effective strategy can be developed to reduce the impact of illicit arms trafficking on human security.

## **7. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the issue of illicit arms trafficking and its impact on human security is a complex challenge that demands concerted action. This working paper has explored various dimensions of this problem, from the definition of arms trafficking to the ways it disrupts human security across different regions and the initiatives established to combat it.

Illicit arms trafficking significantly contributes to violence, conflict, terrorism, and organized crime, undermining the various dimensions of human security. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons has facilitated armed conflicts and fuelled civil wars, resulting in severe threats to personal and community security. Moreover, the use of illicit arms by terrorist groups and criminal enterprises has led to instability, thereby affecting economic and political security.

The international community's response to this issue demonstrates the importance of cooperation and commitment to mitigate the consequences of illicit arms trafficking. The United Nations, regional agreements, and bilateral agreements all play important roles in addressing this global problem. Although there have been successes in some areas, persistent challenges remain, necessitating further collaboration and adaptation of strategies.

Combatting illicit arms trafficking requires strengthening arms control measures, enhancing international cooperation, promoting education and awareness, and addressing the root causes of conflict and instability are all crucial components of a comprehensive strategy. By implementing these recommendations, nations and international bodies can work together to reduce the impact of arms trafficking on human security and advance towards a safer world. As we move forward, we must remain vigilant in our efforts to curtail the illicit arms trade, as well as address the underlying causes of conflicts and instability. By doing so, we can contribute to a world where human security is more secure, and the devastating impact of illicit arms trafficking is significantly reduced.

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