



# REPORT

**Africa Seminar: Arms proliferation dynamics in the Lake Chad  
Basin Region**

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## **Egmont - Royal Institute for International Relations, Africa Seminar: Arms proliferation dynamics in the Lake Chad Basin Region**

On **14 November 2024**, the Africa Seminar on Arms proliferation dynamics in the Lake Chad Basin Region was held at the **Egmont Institute**.

The seminar tried to assess the state of the art of arms proliferation in the Lake Chad Basin Region and also in other parts of the African continent, such as the Sahel region and Western Africa. The focus of the seminar moved also onto the attacks on security forces of different national and international actors as well as Nigeria's use of civilian volunteers for security operations.

The seminar served to present some of the research findings of the Safeguarding Security Sector Stockpile Initiative (**S4**), whose aim is to reduce loss of contingent-owned equipment (COE) and recovered material within conflict settings by promoting good practice and accountability through sound weapons and ammunition management (WAM).

In fact by looking at the dynamics of arms proliferation in conflict zones it is possible to notice that most of the weapons possessed by rebel groups or terrorist organisations operating those areas come from the same states that are fighting them.

A recently released study conducted by S4-UN on Nigeria's **Borno** region's "volunteer security outfits" unveiled that non-state state-armed groups are a growing phenomenon and that there is need for change, as focusing only on arms control is not enough.

The study was conducted within the framework of several evidence-based studies and projects, such as the Making Peace Operations More Effective (**MPOME**) project of the Small Arms Survey.

The aim of these studies and projects was to increase sensitization, provide training, and support policy development in order to assist peace operations to improve their weapons and ammunition management and thus more effectively prevent diversion from their stockpiles.

The first case study discussed **South Sudan** and UN missions in the region. In particular the focus concerned the attacks and the losses of the security peacekeepers and the attempt to minimise such losses. In fact the number of attacks and level of loss was greater than estimated.

**Peacekeeping** has always been considered difficult but in these cases the number of losses faced by international actors were too high to be explained by this, as the international actors involved in peacekeeping operations always honoured their challenges and performed well.

Peacekeepers routinely had weapons seized, there was constant seizing of weapons without a perfect control over them and recovered weapons were being recirculated to rebel and terrorist groups. The relevant problem was the lack of motivation in avoiding the ceasing of arms ammunition to rebel and terrorist groups, which facilitated arms proliferation.

Thanks to the MPOME project this issue was brought to the international agenda with the creation of new policy making for establishing arms control and recovering weaponry with the support of the African Union and the United Nations, and regional organisations such as ECCAS and ECOWAS included.

The problem of arms proliferation also included more than 100 **Non-UN peace operations** deployed by more than 25 different organisations that substituted in many cases UN peacekeepers.



The losses of arms and ammunition also included heavy weapons systems, as the checks and balances to control lethal material was not always perfectly efficient and there was a lack of organisation and experience that played an important role.

The discussion proceeded with the main findings of the **Lake Chad Basin Study** which showcased the situation of the region with tremendous amounts of equipment losses, heavy weaponry included, caused by more than 500 attacks on national and international security forces in about 10 years, 80% of whom happened in Nigeria. Many of these weapons were built in, and sold by, EU member states, but also other actors such as China.

The best explanation for these incidents was the lack of leadership, training, equipment, and morale of the peacekeeping forces, as the equipment was lost especially during attacks to bases where it was stored.

This was a main problem in the Lake Chad Basin Region and Nigeria, but also in other parts of Africa, such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin or Niger and eastern Africa too. It is possible to say that it is a continental problem

It was assessed that the political will to engage in this problem exists, it is necessary to improve resources for research and reporting.

The other important topic of the seminar regarded the **S4-UN Borno-based VSO (Volunteer security outfits) study**.

The focus of the study were: the four Borno-based VSOs, the Borno State Hunters Association (BoSHA), the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), the Kesh Kesh vigilante group and the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN); their arms holding & means of acquisition and the efforts to minimise misuse and loss.

The VSOs are state- backed non-state organisations composed of armed civilians that act as a form of security forces. The four Borno-based VSOs count for more than 50.000 men and women, roughly about 10 times the number of the police force, and are armed with rudimentary artisanal rifles and shotguns mainly acquired from local, state or federal government, from battlefield capture or local purchase.

These groups are acquiring more and more political power, are held in high-esteem, and their services are in great demand, especially from local army officials.

However, there are some concerns regarding the politicisation of some of these groups and their utility in the field, as they experience severe losses, as well as the protection from external threat or from internal problems, such as misuse or diversion, of the arsenals of weapons of VSOs.

Furthermore, during the seminar there was a focus on the **S4 Initiative**. S4 was built on the base of MPOME project but differs from it in 4 ways, as it covers heavy weapons systems, non-lethal materiel, security sector personnel outside of Public Service Obligations (PSOs) and introduces new methodology for assessing loss.

S4 seeks to engage new communities of policy makers and practitioners, to create evidence-based research and analysis to support monitoring and evaluation for policymaking and programming, as well as to promote accountability. Moreover it proposes to support global and regional actors, such as ECOWAS, and base its research on open-source information.

Through this approach more than 2.500 incidents over the 2015-24 period were recorded, of which 1.500 occurred in Nigeria.



S4 proposes static maps of selected incidents that happened in the Lake Chad Basin Region, Greater West Africa and Greater Horn of Africa and static maps of selected incidents are planned for Niger's 7 regions; Greater Southern Africa, and Nigeria, resources permitting.

In fact S4 has been able to attract several international partners, from African and European governments to the UN, with the prospect to extend the partnership to regional organisations such as the ECOWAS or the European Union. Their work is not a matter of political will, as it exists, but a matter of resources.

Moreover some new policy relevant research was proposed, such as African governments and governors increasing reliance on militias or the assessments of AU and UN policies on managing recovered arms in peace operations.

The question of increasing the **engagement of the EU** in the area of peacekeeping and arms control was raised, citing for example the EU peace facility, the COARM and CONOP working parties, respectively for conventional arms exports and for non-proliferation and disarmament, and EU peace operations particularly in the security-sector capacity building, such as EUCAP.

The seminar then moved on with the discussion analysing different issues such as the strengths and weaknesses of certificates regarding weapons exports to third countries concluding that arms exports are not inherently negative, but there is a pressing need to improve control mechanisms and politics and business considerations are the factors that determine arms exports rather than certificates. The exemption system of certificates and arms exports to ECOWAS countries is limbo and operates under a moratorium, it needs revitalization as there are some issues regarding the decision-making processes, transparency and a lack of participation by countries that anticipate rejection. Countries like Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, distancing themselves from France, are seeking arms from Russia, Turkey, and possibly China.

The discussion then moved towards the decline of institutional international organisations, such as the Accra Initiative, that raise questions about arms control frameworks and their effectiveness.

Regarding the challenges with VSOs it was outlined that there have been tensions between federal government and state governors, especially in Nigeria, that highlight the disputes over local militias.

For what concerns the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) and Peacekeeping Efforts it was highlighted that in many African countries the systems of presidential guards often operate outside army control and acquire weapons independently, and that poses significant challenges for arms regulation. Moreover, the ATT took a great deal of time to enter into force as it required several countries to ratify it and this decreased the possibility to control arms weapons.

Some recommendations for EU and Neighbouring Countries in the region of the Sahel were proposed, in particular regarding measures and actions to prevent the spillover effect of weapon proliferation in the region and the domino effect. Another issue concerns competitors like Russia and China that are posing major challenges to the EU.

More transparency was asked towards UN and national peacekeeping missions together with countries that contribute to the arms supply to avoid as much as possible that weapons end up with non-state groups, sharing of information in this sense has been redeemed as crucial.