The Enemy Within: Rethinking Arms Availability in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Over the past decade small arms and light weapons availability has been singled out as one of sub-Saharan Africa’s highest profile challenges. Yet the construction of the threat of arms availability as one of authorised trade and illicit trafficking across international borders has resulted in a narrow focus on regulating lawful exports and imports and brokers. While these are real and legitimate concerns, the authors contend that small arms and light weapons availability should be re-evaluated as a complex social phenomenon involving dynamic supply and demand dimensions. A limited emphasis on controlling authorised transfers to war zones glosses over the challenges of illegal markets, the gradual emergence of national arms production capacities across Africa and the systematic diversion of weapons and ammunition surplus from the domestic stocks of security services into civilian hands. It also obscures a more dynamic landscape of armed violence across the continent which extends beyond war zones.

Whilst the conventional interpretation of arms availability is favoured by African diplomats and international arms control experts, such a reading potentially obscures the weaknesses of security governance and the myriad motivations and means shaping small arms and light weapons acquisition and misuse amongst armed groups and civilians.