

Hidden in Plain Sight

Arms, Trade, and the Case for Multiple Disruptions in Nigeria's Borderlands



1 The Problem

Arms proliferation in Katsina State is not a standalone criminal problem. It is embedded within the wider livelihood systems, governance arrangements, and border economies that sustain communities across the Nigeria–Niger corridor. Security-led interdiction creates temporary disruption but does not alter the underlying equilibrium. The supply chains adapt. The demand persists.

Research conducted under the SPRiNG programme across three Local Government Areas, Jibia, Batsari, and Dan Musa, reveals that weapons, ammunition, livestock, fuel, grain, and artisanal gold all move through the same logistics networks, governed by the same actors, timed around the same market-day rhythms. This integration means that arms control cannot be treated as a stand-alone security sector issue.

This summary presents the central findings from the illicit weapons research and sets out the case for a different approach: multiple disruptions applied continuously across pressure points, creating cumulative friction rather than one-shot operations.

2 The Three-Tier Supply Chain

The arms supply chain in Katsina operates through a three-tier spatial architecture, with each study area playing a distinct functional role. Understanding this architecture is essential to identifying where disruption can be most effective.

2.1 Jibia: Principal Intake Point

Jibia serves as the gateway for arms entering Nigeria from Niger, with Maradi functioning as the principal source hub. Cross-border brokers facilitate procurement through kinship ties and informal trade relationships that span the border. Weapons move through both official crossing points and parallel bush tracks that bypass formal checkpoints. The town itself functions as an initial fragmentation point where large consignments are broken down for onward distribution.

2.2 Batsari: Storage and Staging Zone

Batsari functions as the staging area where weapons are stored pending redistribution. Forest routes through the Rugu corridor provide concealment, with staging points at forest edges enabling consignments to be assembled and dispatched. Artisanal mining sites create additional cover, as the movement of people, equipment, and materials provides plausible explanations for unusual activity. Batsari exhibits the most vertically integrated supply chain of the three sites.

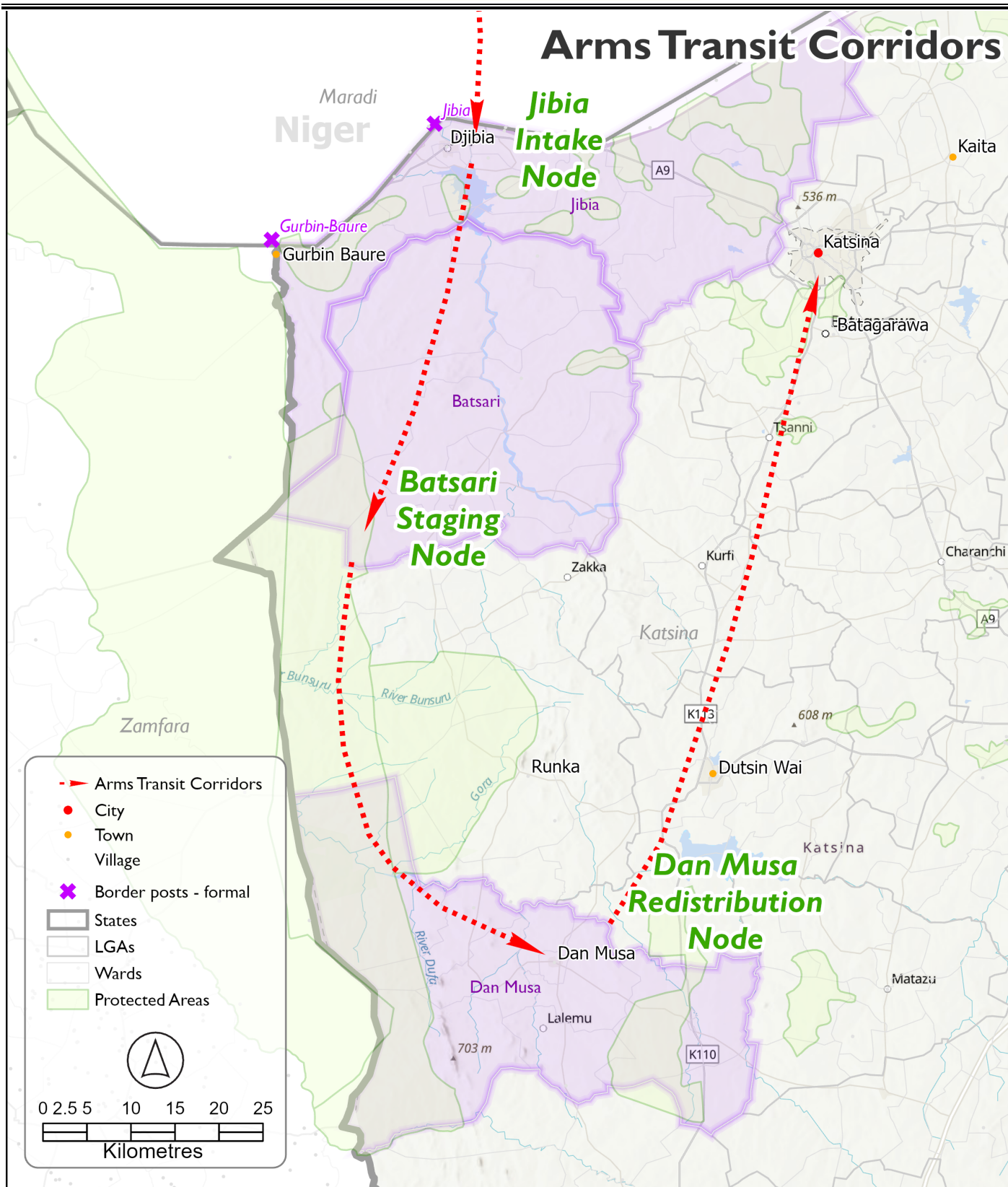
2.3 Dan Musa: Redistribution Hub

Dan Musa serves as the main redistribution hub, with Faru Junction functioning as a critical chokepoint linking inflows from Jibia to networks extending toward Batsari, Zamfara, and Katsina City. Redistribution follows market-day pulses, particularly Sundays, and most weapons move through the system within a 48 to 72-hour window.

"Weapons are frequently hidden in grain sacks and truckloads... they follow the cattle paths — no one stops them there."

— Key Informant, Jibia

Arms Transit Corridors



IUCN, UNEP-WCMC [2016]. The World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA). [Jun. 2016] release. Cambridge (UK): UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre. URL: www.protectedplanet.net. Lines digitized by Dr. John Glover of the University of Redlands. Attribute information created by Jeremiah Huggins of the University of Redlands. Sources: Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community, Esri, USGS

Map 1 shows: Dual purpose markets, crossings and livelihood schemes in Jibia and Batsari LGAs, with small arms corridors, ACLED recorded fatalities, abduction hotspots, checkpoints and cellular coverage overlaid around key nodes such as Magama border crossing, Jibia Central Market, Kusa–Makada river zone, Daddara irrigation scheme and the Rugu forest grazing–mining interface.

3 Hidden in the Economy

The central finding of this research is that arms movement is not driven by isolated criminal networks but is instead embedded within wider mixed-commodity logistics systems. Weapons and ammunition travel through the same routes that carry livestock, fuel, grain, artisanal gold, and everyday passenger traffic.

3.1 Market-Day Rhythms

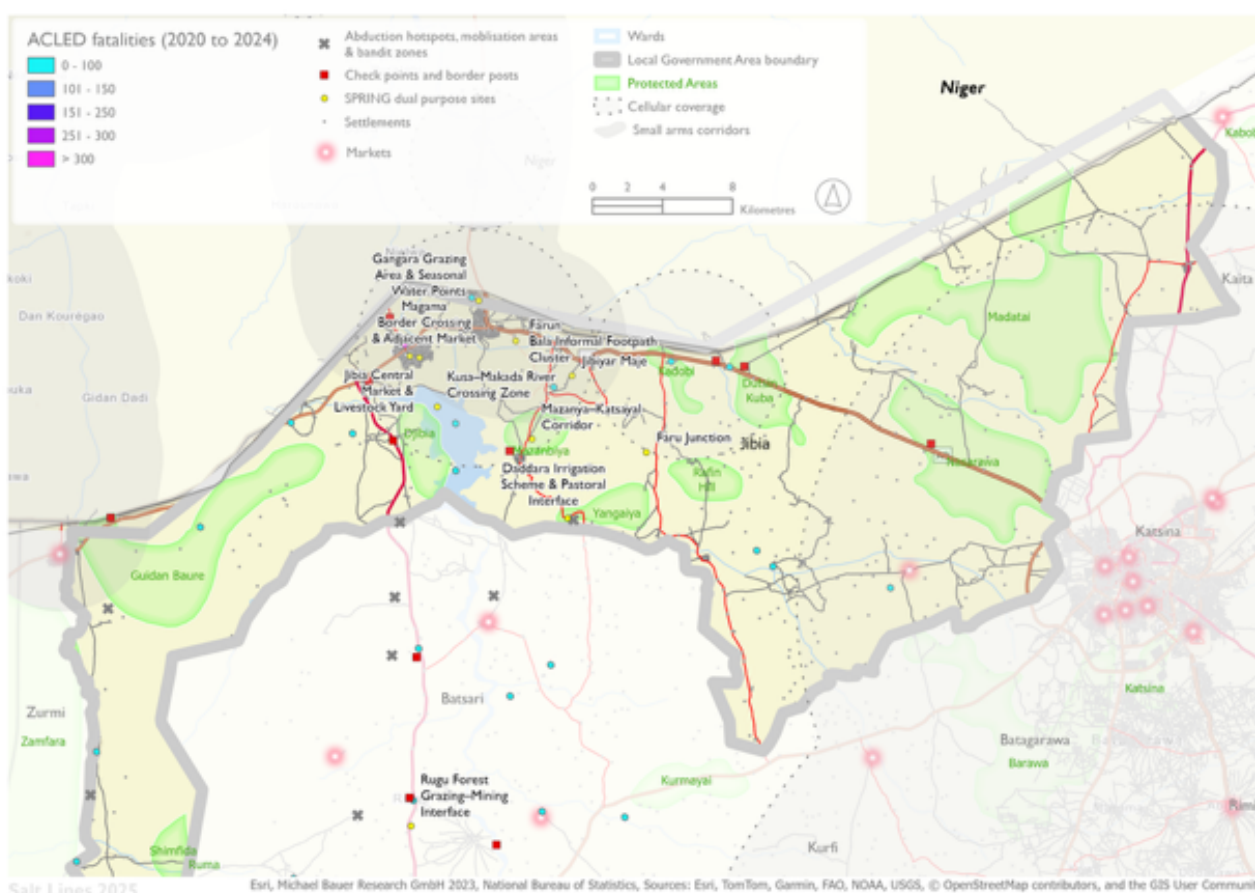
The timing of weapons movement aligns with market-day pulses. Sunday markets at Jibia drive the intake cycle, with redistribution following over the subsequent 48 to 72 hours through Batsari and Dan Musa. This timing is not incidental — it is structural. Commodity and passenger flows peak around market days, providing the volume of traffic within which arms consignments can be concealed.

3.2 Concealment and Seasonality

Concealment techniques rely on blending arms into legitimate consignments: grain sacks, livestock loads, and fuel drums. Seasonal variations shape transport choices, with bulk movements via trucks occurring during the dry months, while motorcycles and foot couriers maintain access during the rains when roads become impassable. Across all sites, the logistics of arms movement mirror the logistics of everyday trade.

"The forest is the main corridor used by people to bypass restrictions and move goods."

— Key Informant, Batsari



Map 2 shows: Dual purpose markets, crossings and livelihood schemes in Jibia and Batsari LGAs, with small arms corridors, ACLED recorded fatalities, abduction hotspots, checkpoints and cellular coverage overlaid around key nodes such as Magama border crossing, Jibia Central Market, Kusa–Makada river zone, Daddara irrigation scheme and the Rugu forest grazing–mining interface.

4 The Dual Gatekeepers

Security and governance in Katsina operate through a hybrid system that blends the influence of state institutions with the authority of traditional rulers, vigilante groups, market committees, and transport unions. This arrangement produces a form of negotiated security, but the same actors who enable stability also facilitate trafficking.

Traditional rulers mediate both weapons passage and land allocation. They are trusted precisely because they provide access, protection, and mediation, regardless of whether they hold formal authority.

Vigilante coordinators manage security and mobility to farms but also control movement through key corridors. Their reach gives them unique intelligence, but formalising them without oversight risks entrenching abuses.

Market committees time weapons redistribution and govern commodity trade. They are the pulse of the local economy and the logistical infrastructure through which arms flow.

Transport unions are implicated in facilitation but also have the reach and local knowledge to serve as monitoring partners if properly incentivised.

Community perceptions of legitimacy are shaped not by official status but by performance. Any intervention must work through these hybrid structures while managing the risk of legitimising arrangements that also facilitate arms flows.

5 The Bottleneck: Ammunition

Across all study sites, ammunition supply emerged as the critical dependency sustaining armed activity. Weapons themselves circulate for years, passing through multiple hands and serving multiple functions. But sustained operations require continuous resupply of ammunition. This dependency creates a fundamentally different kind of chokepoint.

Ammunition is harder to stockpile in large quantities, easier to trace through forensic analysis, and directly tied to the operational tempo of armed groups. If weapons are the infrastructure, ammunition is the fuel. Disrupting ammunition supply does not require seizing every weapon, it requires degrading the resupply chain that keeps those weapons operationally relevant.

However, ammunition is also easier to conceal than weapons. It can be distributed in small quantities across multiple carriers and hidden within everyday goods. This means that interdiction at formal checkpoints alone is insufficient. Effective disruption requires intelligence-led operations synchronised to the timing and routes identified in this research.

5.1.1 Key Implication

Building forensic and tracking capacity for ammunition does not currently exist at scale in the study area. Developing this capacity, linking seizure data across agencies, tracing chain-of-custody from procurement to diversion, is a prerequisite for any sustained disruption strategy. Ammunition tracing should be the priority investment for defence and security stakeholders.

6 The Case for Multiple Disruptions

Single interventions fail because the system adapts. Heavy enforcement at one crossing displaces traffic to less monitored routes. Targeting one actor pushes functions to others. Seizing weapons without addressing demand simply raises prices and incentivises resupply. What works is cumulative friction across multiple pressure points, applied continuously.

6.1 Four Pillars of Disruption

- **Ammunition Targeting:** Focus disruption on the critical dependency rather than the weapons themselves. Build forensic and tracking capacity to trace ammunition from procurement through diversion to end use. Link seizure information across agencies so that patterns become visible.
- **Rhythm-Based Enforcement:** Synchronise enforcement operations to market-day cycles rather than relying on static patrols. Sunday intake at Jibia, followed by 48–72 hour redistribution windows, provides a predictable operational tempo that can be exploited.

- **Converting Dual-Function Actors:** Transport unions, market committees, and vigilante coordinators have the reach and local knowledge to serve as monitoring partners. Their current role in facilitation is partly an economic calculation, changing the incentive structure can convert them from enablers to assets.
- **Livelihood Alternatives as Demand-Side Intervention:** Not as a soft add-on, but as a strategic component. If participation in arms facilitation is partly economic, then viable alternatives offering comparable returns matter. Certification pathways, market access, and nature-based livelihoods can reduce demand, but the incentives must be substantial and visible.

6.2 Evidence from the Sahel

Experiences from across the Sahel consistently show that approaches combining dialogue, legitimacy, and livelihood incentives outperform purely coercive disarmament strategies.

- Community-based disarmament programmes in Burkina Faso (pre-2020) achieved higher voluntary surrender rates when local committees integrated traditional leaders and offered agricultural inputs.
- Niger's pastoralist conflict mediation linked livestock traceability to dispute resolution, reducing cattle-raiding and associated arms demand.
- Mali's DDR programmes showed lower recidivism where economic alternatives were bundled with weapons handover, though those gains were later reversed by broader state collapse.

The common thread is sustained engagement across multiple pressure points, not one-time operations. The failures tend to come when livelihood pressures remain intact while enforcement ramps up, communities simply find alternative suppliers or fabrication routes.

7 The Arms–Environment Nexus

A parallel study under the SPRiNG programme assessed natural capital assets, ecological degradation, and community resilience across the same three LGAs. The synthesis of these two studies reveals a finding of strategic significance: the same territories serving as arms transit corridors, staging zones, and redistribution hubs are simultaneously experiencing the most severe ecological degradation.

This is not coincidence. Arms proliferation, environmental degradation, and livelihood vulnerability are causally interlinked and spatially co-located. Armed activity drives displacement, which concentrates pressure on remaining productive land. Ecological stress deepens livelihood insecurity, which increases dependence on protection economies and the armed actors who control them. The same hybrid governance structures that manage arms flows also govern access to natural resources — land, water, forests, and grazing reserves.

- **Jibia** shows the highest vegetation decline (NDVI loss of -0.18 per decade) alongside its role as the principal arms intake point.
- **Batsari** — the most conflict-affected LGA, exhibits the highest socio-economic sensitivity index (0.82) where ecological stress, displacement, and market disruption reinforce each other.
- **Dan Musa** retains the most favourable ecological indicators and the highest adaptive capacity, making it the most viable location for pilot integrated interventions.

This nexus means that security interventions and environmental programming cannot be designed or delivered separately. They require integrated approaches that address both the supply of arms and the conditions that sustain demand.

8 Managing Unintended Consequences

Any disruption strategy must anticipate second-order effects. The research identified several risks that require active management if interventions are to succeed.

- **Route displacement:** Heavy enforcement at formal crossings can push traffic to less monitored bush tracks and forest corridors, the high-concealment-risk areas identified in this research. Disruption at one node must be accompanied by monitoring at alternative routes.
- **Trade disruption:** Targeting transport unions and market committees risks disrupting the legitimate trade that sustains border communities. Interventions must be designed to separate illicit flows from the commodity systems they exploit, without collapsing the livelihoods that depend on those systems.
- **Governance capture:** Formalising vigilante groups can entrench abuses if oversight mechanisms are not built in. Registration and oversight must be led jointly by NCCSALW and ONSA with human rights-based training as a condition of recognition.
- **Enforcement backlash:** When enforcement ramps up while livelihood pressures remain intact, communities find alternative suppliers or fabrication routes. Enforcement alone, without accompanying demand reduction, can intensify rather than resolve the problem.

These risks are not reasons to avoid action. They are design parameters. Effective disruption requires layered approaches that anticipate adaptation and build in safeguards from the outset.

9 What Comes Next

The evidence base established by this research provides the foundation for a series of practical next steps. These are not aspirational recommendations, they are operationally grounded actions informed by field-verified findings.

- **Build the data spine:** Link seizure information across agencies, Customs, Police, Defence, NSCDC, so that patterns in ammunition movement, diversion points, and supply chain structure become visible at an operational level.
- **Pilot community-based monitoring hubs:** Integrate peace committees with natural resource management governance to create micro-monitoring structures that serve both security and environmental objectives.
- **Synchronise enforcement cycles:** Align interdiction operations to the market-day rhythms and seasonal transport patterns documented in this research, rather than relying on static or randomised patrol schedules.
- **Design conflict-sensitive livelihood interventions:** Bundle economic alternatives with arms oversight commitments, ensuring that certification pathways and market access programmes are explicitly linked to community participation in monitoring and early warning.
- **Deepen ammunition forensics:** Invest in chain-of-custody mapping from procurement through diversion, working with regional partners across the Maradi–Jibia corridor to trace supply at source.

9.1.1 The Framing Question

How can multiple pressure points be applied continuously to create cumulative friction on arms flows, while managing unintended consequences and building in safeguards?

This is not a question that can be answered by a single agency or a single intervention. It requires coordinated, sustained engagement across security, governance, livelihoods, and environment, the approach that this research was designed to support.