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# Christmas Festivities: A Panacea for Peace in Nigeria's Niger Delta?

**Chukwudi Gbadebo Njoku, PhD**  
(Corresponding author)  
Capacity Building Coordinator, Peacebuilding Program, Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND)  
[chukwudi.njokupg@gmail.com](mailto:chukwudi.njokupg@gmail.com)  
Profile: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/chukwudi-njoku-phd/>  
+2348037673467

**Abiodun Akanbi**  
Research Assistant, Peacebuilding Program, PIND  
Profile: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/abiodun-akanbi-21000b7b/>  
[abisund@gmail.com](mailto:abisund@gmail.com)



An Ekpe masquerade during a cultural procession during the Calabar Carnival in December 2018, at Calabar, Cross River State. Image: Chukwudi Njoku

The conflict and security dynamics of Nigeria's Niger Delta region are characterized by historical tensions and a proliferation of armed groups. Conflict issues in the region mainly include communal tensions, political competition, organized criminality, and resource-based conflicts. For example, according to the Foundation for Partnership initiatives in the Niger Delta ([PIND](#)), in 2017, inter-communal tensions and land disputes led to over 600 fatalities. [PIND](#) also reported that targeted attacks on security personnel in the region, driven by a growing anti-police insurgency led to over 200 fatalities between January 2020 and March 2021.

The Niger Delta region is highly heterogeneous with over 40 ethnic groups, who speak more than 100 languages and dialects. The area has a population of [41.5 million](#) people, with Christians being the most dominant religious group. The multi-ethnic and parallel-religious demography of the region influences the peace and security architecture of the area. These demographics, the numerous drivers and the trend of conflicts weaken social cohesion in the area.

Social cohesion [refers](#) to the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups in the society. It identifies how residents in the Niger Delta perceive their place in their communities and their relationships with others. The [Institute for Economics and Peace \(IEP\)](#) identified social cohesion as one factor that leads to positive peace. According to the [Australian Psychological Association](#), this can be through associations that have a peace mission and nourish hope, such as religious congregations or through social events, such as festivals.

Notwithstanding its inherent conflict potential, religion has a strong nexus with peacebuilding. While religion has been [noted](#) to often foment conflict, [research has shown](#) that the practice of religion can be used or mobilized to promote peace, as it has beneficial effects on behavior and social relations.

Festivals have proven to be important tools to peacebuilding in the society. Originally, they were exclusively religious and most of them are still associated with religious observances. [For example](#), in Laos, festivals such as the Soukhoun and Soumma are adopted for conflict resolution and reconciliation ceremonies. The observance of festivals bring about social and moral control as well as entertainment. Moreso, festivals bring people together irrespective of their social standing, while providing avenues to build social cohesion and reinforce ties within people.

The annual Christmas festivities in Nigeria, particularly in the Christian-dominated Niger Delta and notably in the South East region, occurs during the December period and involves people traveling en-mass to their hometowns. The homecoming is a period for celebrating the Christian festival marking the birth of Jesus Christ and organizing unrelated social events and celebrations.

From the foregoing, this article argues that the annual Christmas festivities in the Niger Delta, fosters peace in the region. Inference is thus made from the hypothesis that "Christmas festivities reduce insecurity-related conflicts in the Niger Delta". This article is important as the nexus between religion and violence has been more extensively emphasized than its relationship with peacebuilding. Also, the role of the Christmas festivities has not been identified as a bridge to peaceful co-existence.

## **Data and analyses techniques**

This article used data of conflict incidents in the Niger Delta, collated and triangulated from three secondary data sources - Nigeria Watch, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and PIND's Partners for Peace (P4P) [Peace Map](#). The data covered the period of January 2012 to December 2021 (10 years). Trend analysis was executed based on the overall insecurity-related conflict incidents which include; armed

robbery, cultism, kidnapping, rape, domestic violence, assassination and thuggery. The one-sample t-test was used to test for statistical difference in the means of the yearly conflict incidents.

### Analyses and discussions

The analysis shows a recurring pattern of reduction in conflicts during the month of December, which marks the festive period. An examination of the incidents of conflicts for the years under consideration as shown in the collage, in Figure 1, depicts that in the year 2021, there was a reduction in conflicts in the festive month of December. The trend was similar for the year 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2018 (representing 70 % of the 10 year period), suggesting that the pattern is not a result of random processes, but likely influenced by social, economic or other factors. There were exceptions in 2017, 2019 and 2020 when the conflict incidents increased in the month of December. The one-sample t-test analysis output in Table 1 indicates that the exceptions do not provide significant deviations to the trend ( $p = 1.0 < 0.05$ ), thus an acceptance of our hypothesis that the Christmas festivities in the month of December leads to a reduction in insecurity-related conflicts in the Niger Delta period, thus engendering peace in the region during the period.

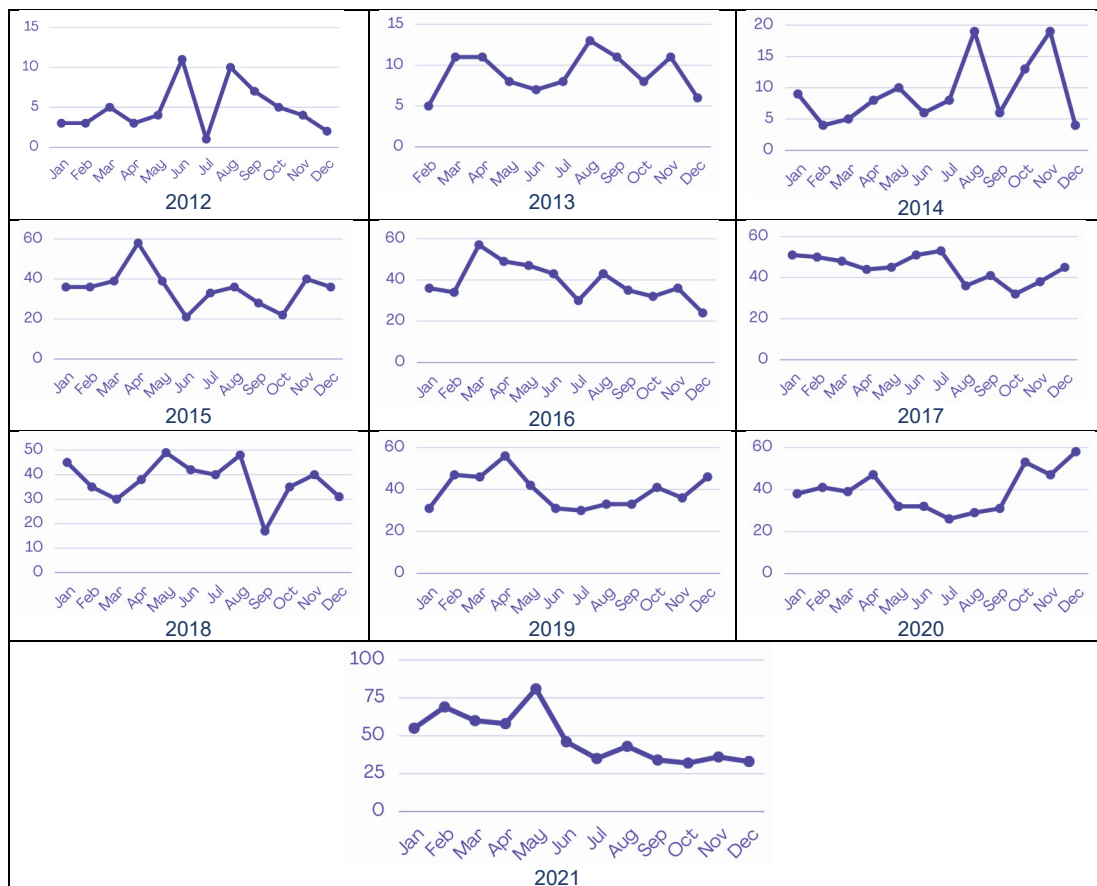


Figure 1: Monthly number of insecurity-related conflicts in the Niger Delta (2012 – 2021)

Table 1: One -sample t-test result for comparison of yearly means of conflicts

	Test Value = 30.5		Sig. (tailed)	2- Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df			Lower	Upper
Average number of conflicts	.000	11	1.000	.000	-2.51	2.51

Based on this deduction, the argument is that; conflicts in the Niger Delta region reduce during the festive period in December, as a significant percentage of the populace, including the conflict sponsors and perpetrators are very likely engaged, positively. In 2021, [Nigeria Watch](#), in their Eleventh Report on Violence in Nigeria identified a similar trend of conflict and violence reduction during the month of December with the pastoralist-farmer conflict in Nigeria. Although the study did not directly attribute this to the Christmas festivity, it noted that the number of fatalities was at the least, during the festive month because it coincides with the harvest season. During this period, there is usually plenty of food for the farmer, stubs for the cattle and fallow farm plots which can allow the pastoralists to graze without provocative encounters with the farmers. Likewise, 2020 [statistics](#) of crime cases registered in Ghana, showed a reduction of crime during the festive season. This was also not attributed to the Christmas celebration but adds credence to the argument in this article.

A 2015 [report](#) corroborates the hypothesis from this study that “although there may be a common perception that domestic violence increases during the holidays, there is limited and inconclusive research on such a link. Rather, information on the number of calls received by the National Domestic Violence Hotline (NDVH) in the USA for the past ten years indicates that the number of calls drops dramatically during the Christmas and New Year holidays.” This was attributed to the fact that the holidays are about “family, togetherness, happiness which explains why violence do not spike, and violence may even go down”.

Being a period of celebration, several cultural festivals are subsumed in the Christmas festivities during the December period in the Niger Delta. For example, the Carnival Calabar is held every December. Also is the Afro Street Festival in Port Harcourt, the Eremutoru Festival in Ekeremor, Bayelsa State, and so on. According to [Sadeghi](#), these festivals may be applicable to address social tensions at different stages of conflict. The culture of merriments and communality during the December period which is evidenced by families coming together and celebrations such as marriages, coronations, the funeral of aged people, football competitions, masquerade carnivals and so on, are customs in the region. These norms can be explored for building peace and social solidarity. This is [because](#) the culture has fed into the attitudes and values of the people, which in turn determines how they interact with each other.

A common factor in the yearly December festivities is that it provides an atmosphere of relaxation, merriment, celebration and draws people together. Festivals engender peace because it creates the euphoria of feasting and brings together people of different social strata and ideological inclination.

## **Conclusion**

This article concludes that the Christmas festivities and other ceremonies during the December period reduce insecurity-related conflicts in the Niger Delta. This evidence indicates strongly that it is a good social strategy for the government and other stakeholders to leverage on existing religious, cultural and secular festivals and organize new festivities to foster social cohesion and peaceful co-existence in the region.