VOICES FROM BRAZIL IN THE FACE OF THE GREEN TRANSITION

We can't speak about climate justice without our organized territories

ODG
OBSERVATORI DEL DEUTE EN LA GLOBALITZACIÓ

Title:
VOICES FROM BRAZIL IN THE FACE OF THE GREEN TRANSITION
"We can't speak about climate justice without our organized territories"

Authors: Júlia Martí Comas and Clàudia Custodio Martínez

Foreword: Ricardo Assis Gonçalves

Revision: Marta Pérez Fargas

Translation: L'Apòstrof, SCCL

Design and layout: Lucía Armiño

Printing: Cooperativa Cevagraf

Editor: Observatori del Deute en la Globalització
c/ Junta de Comerç, 20 principal. 08001 Barcelona

observatori@odg.cat · Tel: 93 301 17 93 · www.odg.cat/en

May 2026

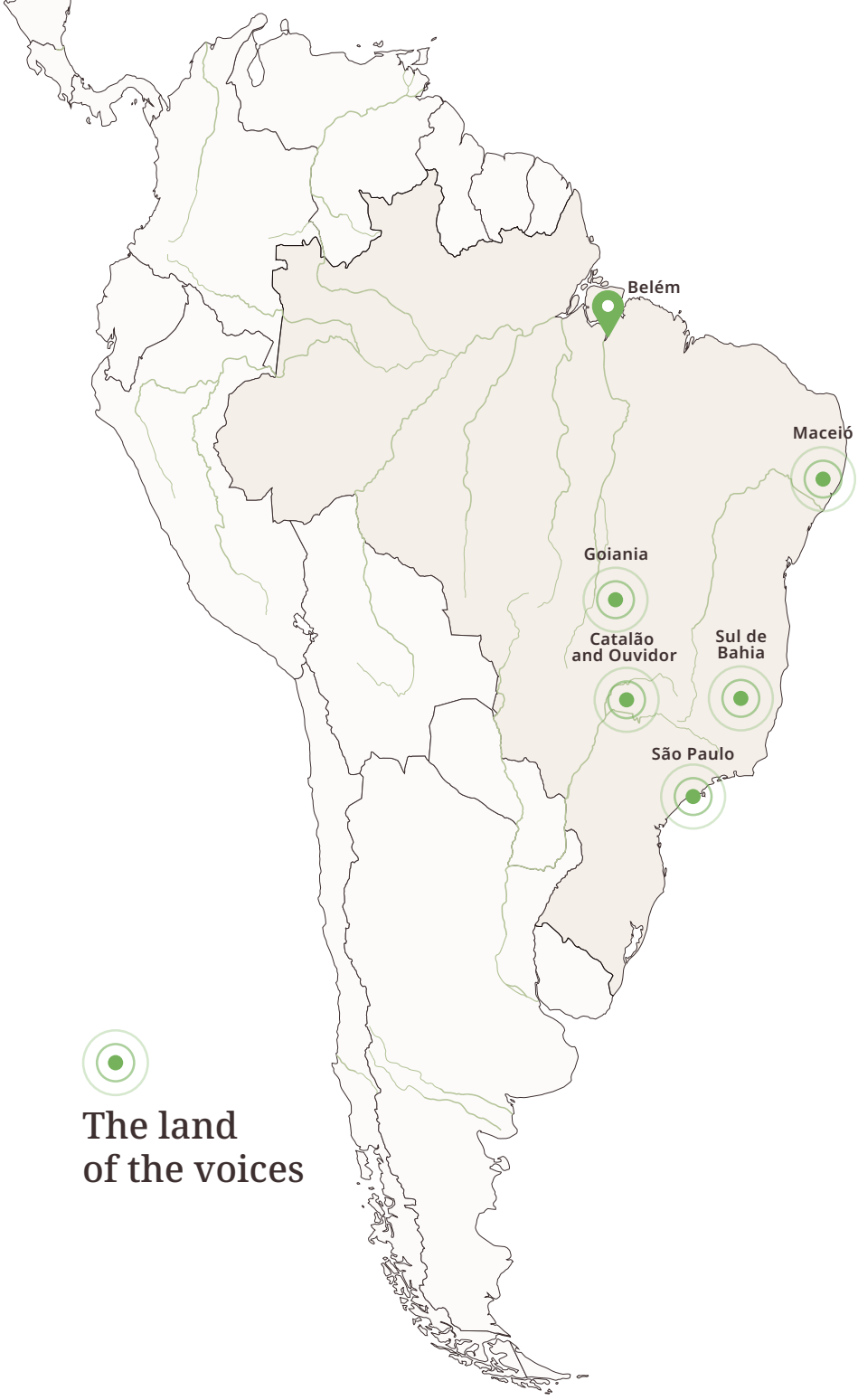
Supported by:

Diputació Barcelona

ROSA LUXEMBURG FOUNDATION

The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of the Observatori del Deute en la Globalització (ODG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders.

Images:
Page 6: Google Earth
All the other images were taken during ODG's fieldwork in Brazil.



The land of the voices

The voices from the land

Interviewees

Ingrid Ãgohó: leader of the Pataxó people in the Extremo Sul de Bahia region. Her people are fighting to defend lands reclaimed from *fazendeiros* who constantly harass and threaten them. Despite this violence, they remain on their lands, restoring their culture and protecting ecosystems affected by centuries of monoculture.

Rikartiany Cardoso: a lawyer and human rights expert who lives in Maceió (Alagoas), a city heavily affected by mining. She is part of the national coordination of MAM, the Brazilian Movement for Popular Sovereignty in Mining, which began to organize in 2012 and is now present in nine states.

Simone Rodrigues: a popular educator, she is part of the national leadership of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST). She lives in one of its settlements located in Extremo Sul de Bahia.

Karina Martins: a professor and member of the national coordination of MAM (Movement for Popular Sovereignty in Mining).

Erahsto Felício: an educator and communicator in the organization Teia dos Povos and coauthor of the book *Por terra e território*, which calls for food sovereignty and autonomy of peoples. Teia dos Povos is a network of rural and urban communities, peoples, and organizations working together to build a strong Black, Indigenous, and popular alliance.

Ricardo Assis Gonçalves: a researcher at Goiás State University in the city of Goiânia. A geographer, he is a member of the research group PoEMAS (on politics, economy, mining, environment, and society). He has focused his research on the conflicts generated by mining, and is currently studying the impacts of the extraction of critical minerals.

Marcos José de Oliveira: a farmer in the Catalão region who has been affected by niobium and phosphate mining for over fifty years. His family was displaced in the past, and his land is once again under threat from the expansion of the mine.

Niobium mine between the municipalities of Catalão and Ouvidor, below the San Marcos River.

Foreword

> *My body of stone was torn,*
> *A chunk of me*
> *Was taken away, with no fear or haste"*
>
> Translated from *Terra,* by Francisco Mário

In November 2025, in the city of Belém (state of Pará), Brazil hosted the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP30). Holding COP30 in a city located in the Brazilian Amazon was symbolic, and it served as a basis for debates on climate change and the challenges of the green transition. At this event, different perspectives on how to confront the global environmental disaster stood out. On one hand, heads of state and government leaders, diplomats, and representatives of companies from the technology, energy, and mining sectors debated strategies for decarbonization and technological innovations for the production of renewable energy. On the other, Indigenous leaders, members of popular movements, environmental activists, and critical scientists (especially from the Global South) debated and denounced the injustices and inequalities of the green transition.

Therefore, we can say that the green transition involves a double contradiction. First, in order for wealthy and developed countries to produce the new technologies and infrastructures needed for an economy with low carbon emissions, thousands of tonnes of minerals are obtained from the extractive peripheries of the Global South, which are transformed into immense open-pit sacrifice zones. This reveals an unequal transition. Developed countries benefit from technological advancements, the valorisation of high-tech products, and from hosting the headquarters of major energy and mining companies. Meanwhile, countries in the Global South continue to export raw materials and semi-manufactured products. This reflects the persistence of a neo-eco-colonial logic.

The second contradiction arises from the fact that the green transition expands strategies for capitalist accumulation that depend on the colonization of nature through the appropriation of common natural resources like water, land, minerals, and forests. The frontier of capitalist accumulation makes use of "green businesses", "climate finance", "carbon markets", and other speculative practices. As a result, the frontier of capitalist accumulation remains active and continues to expand, and it imposes extractive imperialism on the territories of countries in regions like Latin America. This reveals that accu-

mulation strategies have incorporated narratives in favour of decarbonization, renewable energy, and the circular economy.

The synthesis of these contradictions is visible in Brazil. Its lands and its geo-socio-biodiversity are exposed to an economic model that depends on the extraction and export of common natural goods that are transformed into agricultural and mineral raw materials. Brazil's subsoil, rich in minerals that are essential for the green transition, is fought over by global powers like the United States and EU countries. This lays bare the painful wounds of a threatened, fractured body-territory, as illustrated by the lyrics of the song-Terraby Francisco Mário, cited as the epigraph of this foreword: "My body of stone was torn / A chunk of me / Was taken away, with no fear or haste".

Faced with this situation, increasing importance must be given to the struggle in defence of environmental justice and against the plundering of people and communities threatened or affected by the hegemonic model of environmental transition. Furthermore, it is essential to amplify the voices of those who fight for lands that can be fully lived in. It is also essential to intensify resistance against the economic rationale that preys on and colonizes nature.

In recent decades, Brazilian grassroots movements like the Movement for Popular Sovereignty in Mining (MAM), the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), and the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) have fostered rebellion. Therefore, when activists—the men and women committed to the struggle—join forces and raise their voices to declare that "We can't speak about climate justice without our organized territories", they do so with radical awareness and courage. Their lessons on resistance continue to forge solidarity in the most remote regions of Global South countries like Brazil.

Ricardo Assis Gonçalves

Professor at Goiás State University (UEG) and member of the research group PoEMAS
(on politics, economy, mining, environment, and society)

What do the activists and defenders of territory in Brazil think about the climate emergency and the green transition? How is this transition experienced here, in the country that welcomed COP30 with a grand speech about the climate while continuing to invest in a developmentalist model? What alternatives are communities building? We are convinced that we have a great deal to learn from Brazil's peasant, Indigenous, and community struggles, and that this will help inform our debates on climate justice. Therefore, we would like to record some of the reflections shared by activists, defenders of territory, and community leaders.

From 27 October to 22 November 2025, a team from ODG travelled throughout Brazil to encounter movements resisting rare earth extraction and to take part in the People's Summit that took place during COP30 in Belém. We spent time in the Extremo Sul de Bahia region, at an MST school where we participated in a training programme alongside members of MAM and where resistance to the mining of rare earths is taking shape. We also visited Goiás state to witness the impacts of the extraction of niobium in the municipalities of Catalão and Ouvidor where, furthermore, there are now plans to extract rare earths. This document includes the voices of some of the activists we met.

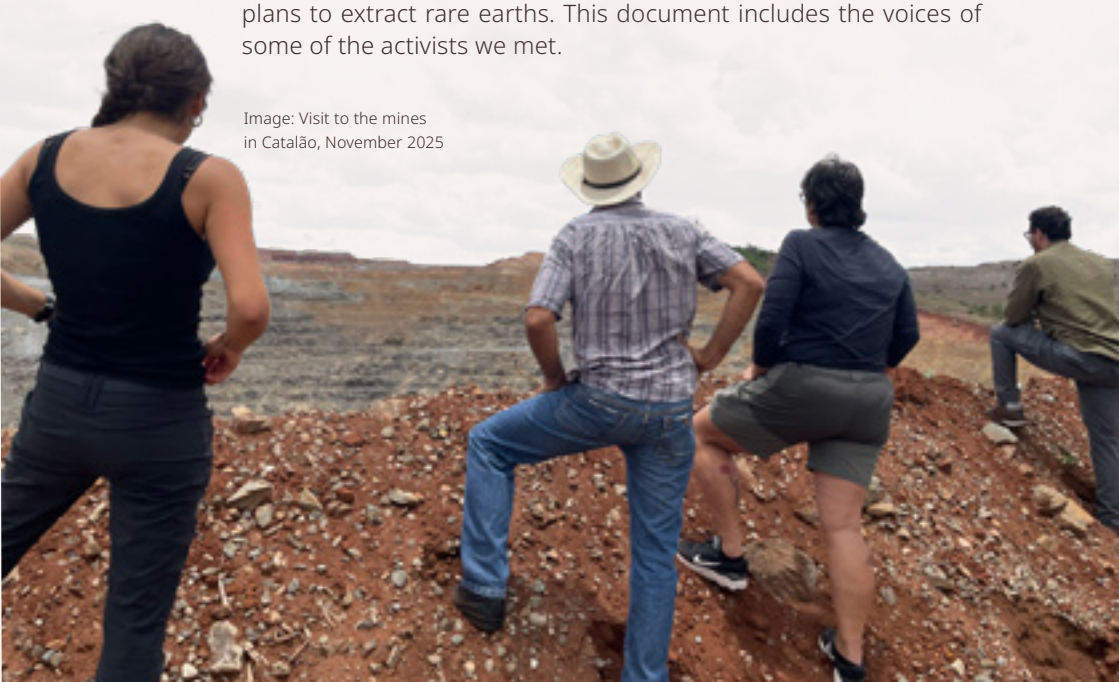


Image: Visit to the mines in Catalão, November 2025

1. A hurried green transition that puts the fight against the climate emergency at risk

> *Everything that's urgent about energy processes and the environmental transition is urgent to capitalism, not to people"*
>
> Erahsto Felício

Our interviewees agree that, in the end, the urgency of the transition is the result of big corporations' pursuit of profit, and that other social and environmental priorities are being sidelined. Teia dos Povos member **Erahsto Felício** criticizes the speed with which the environmental transition is being carried out, noting that this urgency isn't applied to things like banning the use of pesticides on large-scale farms or halting water concessions for the large-scale cultivation of soya, cotton or maize. "If it was really so urgent, if it really was life-and-death, it would be about taking care of water or trying not to pollute aquifers. Everything that's urgent about energy processes and the environmental transition is urgent to capitalism, not to people", he states bluntly.

Image:
Niobium and phosphate mine in Catalão.

Nevertheless, the narrative of this supposed urgency is used to legitimize the imposition of megaprojects and the expansion of "green" mining. "The argument that minerals need to be extracted in order to address climate change became an argument for the expansion of the frontier of mineral extraction", notes **Ricardo Assis**, a researcher at Goiás State University. Brazil is currently the country with the second-largest reserves of rare earths on the planet; these are used in renewable technologies, but also in the arms industry. As a result, Assis refers to this territory as the "miners' El Dorado".

This narrative favours corporations and governments. It legitimizes a green transition that has become a strategy for economic growth, all without questioning the extractivist and consumer culture that brought about climate change. It's "profit for profit's sake", in the words of **Simone Rodrigues**, of MST. According to Erahsto, it's a transition tailor-made for corporations, a proposal based on investments and on financial assets, not on a country's development. "There's nothing wrong with building a wind turbine. The problem is building 300 turbines all in one region. It's a matter of scale."

But for these communities, the question is not only how, but for what purpose. As noted by Simone, the exploitation of natural resources should be organized to extract what's needed to live, instead of following the current unrestrained model.

2. Local communities suffer the consequences of extractivism, which benefits large corporations

> *All our rights are violated by mining"*
> Rikartiany Cardoso

Extractivism consists of a process that expropriates nature for export without generating development or wealth for the local population. **Karina Martins**, of MAM defines extractivist projects as the cause of death for territories. Simone also denounces that projects are being justified carelessly in the name of development, impoverishing communities while only benefiting a handful of corporations.

In fact, "all our rights are violated by mining", according to MAM activist **Rikartiany Cardoso**, For example, in Catalão (Goiás), where the world's second-biggest niobium mine is located and rare earths have also been discovered, local farmer, **Marcos José de Oliveira,** explains that due to processing and extraction, locals suffer from air pollution, water crises, and "roach smell".[1] "The logic of mining companies, of capitalism, is devastating. We're living in a terrifying scenario, a calamity in terms of coexistence", he states. The local population suffers from health problems, he explains, and locals' mental and emotional health are also affected. Furthermore, they are constantly being displaced by the expansion of the mine. In the case of Marcos' community, displacement was carried out through judicial means. "A judge can revoke land titles and expel families. So it's an invasion, except it's legalized", he affirms.

It's also common for megaprojects to eliminate cemeteries, which are very important for religious practices of African origin. Karina speaks of the violence that this entails, perpetrated by mining companies. "It's really painful to know that you'll never be able to pay homage again, you'll never be able to light another candle." The same happens with hydroelectric power plants, which the government takes pride in because they fit within the framework of the transition and generate 56% of Brazil's electricity. But in the words of the same activist, "That's painful, too, because under that water there's a whole city [...]. We're not just talking about concrete; we're talking about subjectivities, about memories. We're talking about life and about a sense of belonging to this land. And it isn't easy to be forcibly displaced."

1 A literal translation of the Portuguese *cheiro de barata*. This is a common term among inhabitants of the city, used to refer to the stench of air pollution from phosphate-processing facilities located close to working-class neighbourhoods. This gave birth to a popular term to refer to this odour: "roach smell".

Activists denounce that forced displacement due to megaprojects has social impacts like an increase in poverty, unemployment, the strengthening of patriarchal structures, increased child malnutrition, and higher neonatal mortality.

Other abuses endured by communities affected by megaprojects include revictimization and "the process of not being heard, of not being granted constructive and decision-making power", Rikartiany states. Furthermore, she explains that in legal proceedings, communities rarely enjoy the support of independent scientific experts who can certify any damage done. Meanwhile, consultancy firms paid by corporations distort the truth.

Faced with the lack of the tools needed to achieve justice, Rikartiany argues for the need for comprehensive reparation "that includes holding these corporations accountable and making them punishable." The right to the non-repetition of crimes needs to be guaranteed, as should the right to be heard and the right to public mobilization. Simply offering monetary compensation to the affected communities falls outside this logic, since "It isn't reparation, it's financial compensation."

Image:
Tailings close to the extraction of niobium and phosphates in Catalão

3. An enduring colonial genealogy

Activists from both MAM and MST have no doubt that the processes associated with extractivism are nothing new: they are historical, and date back to the beginning of the colonial era. The exploitation of territories in Brazil (as well as in other Latin American and African countries) has continued ever since. Rikartiany states bluntly that "Mining is the genealogy of disasters in the territories that were invaded. It's a centuries-old reality." Simone adds that denying the existence of Indigenous peoples "legitimizes the power of exploitation within these territories."

Many megaprojects are carried out within the territories of traditional peoples or already vulnerable areas. Meanwhile, they rarely affect large landowners, as Karina and Erahsto point out. Erahsto asks: “If we want a green transition, why don’t we start with the people who have the most money, the most resources?”

> *If we want a green transition, why don’t we start with the people who have the most money, the most resources?*
>
> Erahsto Felício

Image:
MAM activists at the People’s March on November 15 2025 in Belem, Brazil.

4. Popular sovereignty in mining as an antidote against extractivism: proposals and alternatives

> *"Nothing about us without us"*
>
> Rikartiany Cardoso

The popular sovereignty MAM defends is a proposal "to address the means of production in mining, dignity, rights, the working class, and the territories directly affected by power", Karina explains. They do not trust in the state to resolve the problems of the working class: "Nothing about us without us", Rikartiany summarizes.

Karina explains that in the beginning they saw a need to problematize mining, to break with delusions about development and to bring to light its impact on marginalized communities. But when they began their debate on the problem of mining they realized that they needed to go even further, and reflected on what it means to not always see mining as a problem. From there on, they started to consider matters like use or ownership and they realized how difficult it is to consider an absolute and total end to mining. The problem, they concluded, was that current consumption is out of control—in the past, minerals were used in much smaller proportions.

Based on this reflection, they put together a proposal made up of three pillars:

- The first is the defence of mining-free territories, or "territories that haven't yet been attacked". Karina emphasizes that this is especially important for territories where traditional and Indigenous peoples live. She recalls that ILO Convention 169—the result of collective organization—clearly establishes peoples' right to self-determination.
- Second, they reclaim control of territory and consider the need not only to defend the social function of land—recognized in Brazil's constitution—but also the social function of the subsoil. Karina explains that everything that is underground is the property of the Federal Government, and that this creates a contradiction. A territory may have collective rights recognized by agrarian reform, but "If there's a request for a mining exploration study, you have to leave."
- The third pillar is the democratization of mining revenue. A first step would be for communities to decide how the taxes paid by mining companies are spent: for example, on education, housing, or promoting oth-

er economic activities in the area. These taxes have not been revised in a long time, and the percentage dedicated to compensation is minuscule. At present, they are managed by local mayors without accountability, Rikartiany notes.

Finally, Karina reflects on sovereignty from a feminist perspective. “When we talk about sovereignty, we’re also talking about sovereignty over our bodies, over body-territories. Facing misogyny, the patriarchy, racism... And not only environmental racism, but the structural racism we’re all constantly subjected to. The Brazilian patriarchal structure is very strong. So it’s a constant struggle; a struggle against capitalism and, sometimes, against our fellow activists.”

> *“When we talk about sovereignty, we’re also talking about sovereignty over our bodies, over body-territories”*
>
> Karina Martins

Image:
MAM activists at the People’s March on November 15 2025 in Belem, Brazil.

She explains that, in fact, MAM has feminist foundations: women are the first to organize to defend territory, since they’re the ones who are the most worried about its transformation. Meanwhile, men tend to accept claims of economic progress. Nevertheless, she acknowledges that there has still been little recognition of this female protagonism in the fight. They are currently working to change this, preparing protocols so that women can feel like they are a part of these spaces, including as producers of valid knowledge. They have defended women’s right to decide about their bodies as well as to have access to education, which gives them greater economic and intellectual autonomy.

5. Faced with the climate emergency, Brazilian people assert their knowledge

Traditional peoples possess unique knowledge about nature's life and reproductive cycles. This is according to Erahsto, who affirms that "They are the guardians of life, the ones who protect the forests, the estuaries, the mangroves: fragile biomes without which many species of migratory animals would die." As a result, he argues that it is urgent to consolidate the rights of these people in order to sustain life.

One example of this protection of life led by Indigenous people is the struggle of the Pataxó people to reforest and restore the lands affected by agribusiness and deforestation using agroecological techniques and agroforestry management. Pataxó leader **Ingrid Ãgohó** explains that the fight for the forests is key to their survival. Without forests, "How could we have rivers, fish to feed ourselves, water to drink? How could we survive without life-giving trees?"

Therefore, aware of the climate emergency and the threat of deforestation, MST has embarked on a project to plant one hundred million trees across the country. Ingrid, who collaborates with the initiative, explains its objectives: "Plant seeds, fruit trees, so that water reaches the rivers, and so that we can get our food and medicinal herbs from the forest. If we don't have forests, we won't have life. Then how would we cure ourselves?"

Proud of this project, Simone affirms that agroecology offers alternatives to counter a transition based on the large-scale technological solutions that consumerism continues to promote. And along with Ingrid, she reminds us that Indigenous, Quilombola,[2] and traditional peoples have always practiced agroecology, but it is difficult to extend these practices to the rest of society and urban areas. There are also other obstacles, since the territories where it is practiced are being invaded by agribusiness, Ingrid warns.

Erahsto adds that this knowledge should be shared between territories on an international scale. For example, sharing techniques for production in semiarid climates among territories affected by desertification. "It may seem like internationalism is something that isn't very urgent for territories", he reflects, urging us to promote exchanges that go beyond ideas to share peoples' sciences. He ends with this reflection: "I'm totally convinced that the cosmological and philosophical perspectives of one people can help another when there are major transformations, like what we're experiencing now. Therefore, these peoples' teachers—women and men—need to travel from one place to another to transmit their ancestral wisdom, but also their teachings about the land."

2 The descendants of enslaved Afro-Brazilians who escaped from slavery to establish settlements in lands far from European colonization.

How could we have rivers, fish to feed ourselves, water to drink? How could we survive without life-giving trees?”

Ingrid Ãgohó

Image:
Participants in the seminar on rare earth elements at the MST Egidio Brunetto School.

ODG
OBSERVATORI DEL DEUTE
EN LA GLOBALITZACIÓ