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Maranhão and its peoples: chemical warfare and eco-genocide in the Amazon and the Cerrado

Supporting data and information



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Introduction

How do the expansion of the agricultural frontier, pesticides, and the EU-Mercosur Agreement threaten Maranhão's socio-biodiversity?

The Maranhão Agroecology Network (RAMA), the Maranhão Quilombola Movement (MOQUIBOM), the Community Association for Health and Agricultural Education (ACESA), the Collective of Rural Women Workers (CMTR), the Brazilian Institute of Human Rights (IBDH), the Pastoral Land Commission – Maranhão Regional Office (CPT-MA), the German NGO Rettet den Regenwald/Rainforest Rescue, and the National Campaign in Defense of the Cerrado denounce the escalation of violence and the violation of human and territorial rights against Traditional Peoples and Communities in Maranhão.

This statement is addressed to the diplomatic delegations of the member states of the United Nations (UN), special rapporteurs and other special procedures of the Human Rights Council, UN agencies, international civil society organizations, academia, and the press.

Maranhão is the Brazilian state that is home to both the greatest diversity of Traditional Peoples and Communities in the country and the epicenter of rural conflicts and the chemical violence perpetrated by agribusiness against these peoples. Over the past two years, Maranhão has recorded the highest number of rural conflicts in Brazil. In 2024, there were 363 incidents of land-related violence in the state – the highest in the country – and 228 of the 276 cases of pesticide contamination recorded in Brazil, representing 83% of the national total. This represents a 762% increase compared to 2023 (CPT, 2025; RAMA, 2024). The state of Maranhão is located within the Matopiba agricultural frontier, a region encompassing the states of Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí, and Bahia, where 75% of the Cerrado's deforestation occurred in 2024¹.

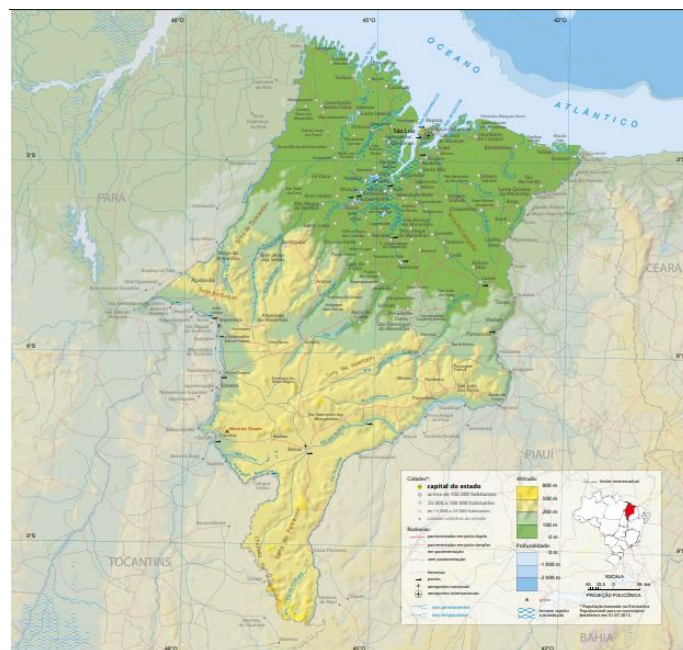
These figures are the result of a model of commodity production for export that encroaches on the Amazon and Cerrado biomes – especially the Mata dos Cocais – destroying babassu palm groves, contaminating rivers, displacing communities, and murdering community leaders. This model is driven, among other factors, by European demand for soy, meat, and pulp, and the EU-Mercosur Agreement – ratified without binding safeguards – is likely to intensify it.

The purpose of our visit to Europe is to present what is happening in the state of Maranhão, to denounce the contradiction inherent in the “sustainable soy” project – which conceals the destruction in the Amazon and the Cerrado – and to offer recommendations so that the European Anti-Deforestation Law and the EU-Mercosur Agreement may, in fact, become instruments for the protection of Brazil's peoples and biomes.

¹ MapBiomass. [Deforestation Alert](#)

1. Maranhão and its peoples: threatened diversity

Maranhão is a unique state in Brazil. Located in the country's Northeast region, it covers an area of approximately 329,000 km²². Its territory comprises three different biomes: 64.1% of the territory lies within the Cerrado biome, 34.8% within the Amazon biome, and 1.1% within the Caatinga³ biome. At the junction of these biomes, the state is home to approximately 10 million hectares of Mata dos Cocais, a forest dominated by the babaçu palm (*Attalea speciosa*)—a vital resource that supports more than 400,000 families of babaçu coconut harvesters⁴. Furthermore, it is the state with one of the greatest cultural and ecological diversities in the country. It is also one of the states with the highest rate of social inequality, where the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) stands in stark contrast to the social exclusion of the populations that inhabit it⁵.



Location of the state of Maranhão. Source: [IBGE](#)⁶

Who are the rural communities of Maranhão:

- a) More than 20 distinct ethnic and indigenous groups, whose territories overlap with the Matopiba agricultural expansion areas (IBGE, 2022; AATR, 2023).
- b) Approximately 2,025 quilombola settlements—the highest number among all Brazilian states (IBGE, 2022).

² IBGE. [A View of Maranhão](#).

³ IBGE. [Baseline Report — Biomes and Vegetation of Brazil](#).

⁴ Interstate Movement of Babaçu Coconut Harvesters (MIQCB). [About MIQCB](#).

⁵ [Maranhão has a Human Development Index \(HDI\) of 0.676, ranking 27th nationally, while the Brazilian average is 0.786](#).

⁶ IBGE. <https://atlasescolar.ibge.gov.br/images/mapas/pdf/estados-maranhao.pdf>

- c) Approximately 300,000 families of babaçu coconut harvesters, occupying about 10 million hectares of babaçu-growing land—the largest group of extractivist populations in the country.
- d) Family farmers, agrarian reform settlers, encamped landless families, artisanal fishermen, and riverine communities whose livelihoods depend directly on natural commons: rivers, forests, native seeds, and babassu groves.

All these communities have their ways of life intertwined with the region's ecosystems. For the coconut breakers, the babassu palm is not merely a source of income; it is food, medicine, culture, identity, and an environmental conservation strategy accumulated over generations. Without the palm tree – which the breakers call “mother palm” – there would be no coconut breaking. And without the coconut-crackers as guardians, the palm tree will cease to exist⁷.

The logic of eco-genocide affecting these ecosystems and peoples is a systemic effect of the expansion of the agricultural frontier, driven in the 1970s by the technological and chemical package of the Green Revolution⁸. From 1985 to 2021, the clearing of new agricultural areas accounted for 68.8% of land-use and land-cover changes in the Cerrado, primarily due to the conversion of native vegetation into pasture and cropland. On the other hand, agricultural intensification accounted for 31.2% of the land-use change driven by agriculture and livestock, mainly due to the conversion of pasture into cropland (8.4 Mha)⁹.

The conversion of native Cerrado areas into pasture and cropland between 2006 and 2019 has already made the region's climate nearly 1.9°C warmer and 10% drier¹⁰. In Maranhão, the expansion of agribusiness into babaçu palm forests and Cerrado grasslands is not merely a process of environmental devastation; it is a process of eliminating traditional and indigenous ways of life¹¹.

2. Deforestation and the expansion of the agricultural frontier: the Cerrado of Maranhão as a sacrifice zone

Maranhão is the state with the highest rate of deforestation in the Matopiba region. In 2024, it lost 218,298 hectares of native vegetation – the largest area among the four states along the agricultural frontier. The municipality of Balsas (MA), which was the leading deforester in the Cerrado of Maranhão for multiple consecutive years – with more than 269,000 hectares cleared for soybean cultivation – accounts for 35% of the deforestation¹².

⁷ RAMA. [A Palm Tree Never Falls: RAMA Expresses Solidarity with the Coconut Pickers of Marmorana](#).

⁸ National Campaign in Defense of the Cerrado. [Eco-genocide in the Cerrado](#)

⁹ MapBiomass. [Technical Note: Potential Impacts of Due Diligence Criteria on the Protection of Threatened Non-Forest Natural Ecosystems in South America](#).

¹⁰ Rodrigues et al. [Deforestation in the Cerrado threatens the regional climate and the availability of water for agriculture and ecosystems](#).

¹¹ Permanent Peoples' Tribunal. [49th Session in Defense of the Cerrado Territories \(2019–2022\)](#).

¹² MapBiomass. [Dados anuais de desmatamento](#).

Between 75% and 82% of total Cerrado deforestation was concentrated in Matopiba between 2023 and 2024. Maranhão has topped the state rankings for the past two years.

4.7 million hectares of native vegetation were cleared in the MATOPIBA region between 2015 and 2024, accounting for 75% of all Cerrado deforestation during that period. Soybeans are the primary driver of land conversion¹³.

Deforestation is encroaching on these territories. Conservation areas, quilombola territories, traditional unregistered lands, and community-use areas have been converted into soybean fields, pastures, and eucalyptus plantations. The “correntão” (which means “big current”) – a deforestation technique that uses enormous chains attached to two tractors – is one of the most widely used methods: it fells the forest and kills animals simultaneously, including babaçu, pequi, and bacuri palm trees, in addition to silting up river headwaters.

The expansion of soybean cultivation across the Cerrado in Maranhão has displaced traditional food crops. Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) show that the state lost 99,756,000 hectares of rice between 2000 and 2024 – a staple food for the people of Maranhão. There has also been a significant decline in the production of beans and cassava, which is directly linked to the growth in soybean production¹⁴.

Recent studies define the Cerrado as an “agribusiness sacrifice zone” – a region where lives and sociocultural relationships between peoples and territories are discarded for the sake of profit from commodity production¹⁵. In southern Maranhão, the region encompassing the municipalities of Balsas, Loreto, Riachão, Mirador, and Açailândia serves as the epicenter of this zone¹⁶.

3. Chemical warfare: pesticides as a weapon of expulsion

In the Cerrado, the expansion of soybean crops goes hand in hand with violence in rural areas – in a synchronized pattern of land grabbing, deforestation, pesticide use, and human rights violations against communities.

¹³ MapBiomass. [RAD 2024](#).

¹⁴ The Wheat and the Tares. [While soybean production is on the rise, the Matopiba states are seeing a decline of thousands of hectares in the area harvested for rice, beans, and cassava](#).

¹⁵ Maria Raquel Rigotto, et al. [Traditional territories and areas sacrificed to agribusiness in the Cerrado](#).

¹⁶ Trase. [Deforestation for soybean cultivation \(ha\) 2022](#).



Contaminated crops and lost food production in rural communities in Maranhão. (Photo: Rogério Albuquerque/RAMA/Acesa)

The term “chemical warfare” is not a metaphor. Community monitoring and testimonies compiled by the Maranhão Agroecology Network (RAMA) in partnership with the Federation of Rural Workers and Family Farmers of the State of Maranhão (FETAEMA) and the Laboratory for Extension, Research, and Teaching of Geography at the Federal University of Maranhão (LEPENG/UFMA) show that the use of pesticides in Maranhão—in addition to being a highly destructive agricultural input—is employed as a deliberate tool to drive communities from their territories. The poison sprayed on crops is also dumped on homes, smallholdings, livestock, and people, with the aim of forcing them to abandon their lands to make way for agribusiness:

The data show an escalation of violence caused by pesticides between 2024 and 2026, with 608 reported incidents: 231 in 2024, 122 in 2025, and 255 between January and June 2026. During the same period, 495 communities were affected by pesticides, 85.1% of which are located in traditional territories¹⁷.

A study by the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz) and the National Campaign in Defense of the Cerrado, conducted using water samples collected from seven communities in the Cerrado, documents how pesticides banned in Europe end up in the water consumed by families in these communities:

¹⁷ RAMA, [First Half of 2026 Confirms Chemical Warfare in Maranhão](#).

600 million liters of pesticides are sprayed in the Cerrado each year. In all the communities surveyed, including the Cocalinho and Guerreiro quilombos in Parnarama, Maranhão, glyphosate was detected in the water¹⁸.

Soybeans account for 63% of the pesticides used in monocultures in Brazil.

Thirteen different pesticides were identified in the water samples collected in the Cerrado. Five of the detected substances are not even listed in Brazilian water monitoring regulations. In the Cocalinho Quilombola Community (MA), 10 of these substances were present in the water consumed by families¹⁹.

Atrazine, cyproconazole, metolachlor, picoxystrobin, and trifloxystrobin – all banned or unauthorized in the European Union – were detected in the water consumed by communities in Maranhão.

Only 32% of the pesticides sprayed will reach the target plants, while 49% will end up in the soil and 16% will be dispersed into the air to areas near the application site²⁰.



Use the QR code to access the full survey in English.

Glyphosate, a substance subject to severe restrictions by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), was detected in 100% of the samples tested in the Cerrado region of Maranhão.

Coconut harvesters report palm trees killed by pesticide drift, coconuts rotting due to aerial spraying, destroyed crops, and contaminated drinking water. Children suffer from open wounds, itching, and respiratory problems. Reports from the Maranhão

¹⁸ Helena Rodrigues Lopes; Aline do Monte Gurgel; Luiza Carla de Melo. [Living in Contaminated Areas: A Report on Pesticides in the Waters of the Cerrado.](#)

¹⁹ Idem.

²⁰ Idem.

Agroecology Network warn: people are literally bathing in poison every day²¹. Spraying by drones is the newest and most terrifying method: silent and difficult to track, it can directly hit targets – such as people, protected areas, and homes – in a matter of minutes²².



The growing use of drones in agriculture has also led to an increase in reports of pesticide contamination in Maranhão (Photo: Wenderson Araujo/Trilux)

In light of recurring complaints filed by local communities, the Federal Regional Court of the 1st Region (TRF1) upheld the immediate suspension of aerial pesticide spraying in the municipality of Timbiras, in Maranhão. The decision by the Fifth Panel upheld the preliminary injunction protecting the traditional communities of São José, Baixa Nova, Maresia, and others in the region, which have reported serious incidents of contamination. The Court followed the opinion of the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office (MPF) and denied an appeal filed by an agricultural aviation company²³.

On September 3, the National Human Rights Council and the Maranhão State Council for the Defense of Human Rights published Joint Recommendation No. 01/2026, addressed to the Maranhão Legislative Assembly, calling for the approval of the Popular Initiative Bill (PL) to ban aerial spraying of pesticides throughout the state of Maranhão. The Popular Initiative Bill emerged from the mobilization of local communities and civil society organizations and already has the backing of the two main human rights bodies at the national and state levels²⁴.

²¹ RAMA. [RAMA Reports Pesticide Contamination, Illness, and Human Rights Violations in Traditional Communities in Buriti \(MA\)](#)

²² Reporter Brazil. [Drones account for 94% of pesticide contamination in Maranhão](#)

²³ Federal Public Prosecutor's Office. [TRF1 follows the MPF's lead and upholds the suspension of aerial pesticide spraying in Timbiras \(MA\)](#).

²⁴ CNDH. [Joint Recommendation No. 01, dated June 12, 2026](#).

4. Land conflicts and violence: the human cost of the agricultural frontier

The expansion of agribusiness into the Cerrado region of Maranhão is inextricably linked to a pattern of systematic violence. The illegal appropriation of public lands, the destruction of smallholdings, threats of eviction, criminal prosecutions against community leaders, and murders all follow a recurring pattern: all of this violence, which occurs as a result of the clearing of new areas for agricultural production, was reported during the hearing of the People's Tribunal of Maranhão against ecogenocide in Matopiba, held on May 6 and 7, 2026, in the capital São Luís, Maranhão²⁵.

The state of Maranhão tops the list for murders of Quilombola community leaders. Between 2005 and 2024, 22 Quilombola leaders were murdered²⁶. In May 2024, quilombola leader Raimundo Bertoldo was murdered in the Quilombo Santa Cruz, in Capinzal do Norte (MA), where he was active in opposing land grabbing and territorial invasions. The municipalities of Chapadinha and Timbiras, located in the Maranhão region of MATOPIBA, are among those with the highest concentration of land conflicts in the state²⁷.

Resistance comes from the territories themselves, manifested through the Network of Traditional Peoples and Communities of Maranhão, a coalition of Indigenous peoples, Quilombolas, artisanal fishermen, riverine communities, coconut breakers, sertanejos, and geraizeiros, which brings together hundreds of communities annually to confront this violence. Despite the strength of this coalition, the pattern of violence is intensifying in tandem with the expansion of the agricultural frontier.

The “sustainable soy” trap: what the RTRS label does not certify

While the chemical war rages against communities in Maranhão, agribusiness is constructing a parallel narrative: that of “sustainable soy.” Balsas presents itself as a “global leader in sustainable soy,” with 20% of its planted area certified by the RTRS (Round Table on Responsible Soy) label. The Northern Export Corridor Research Support Foundation (FAPCEN), a partner of the Sustainable Soy Alliance – coordinated by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) through the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ)

²⁵ CESE. [The People's Tribunal Denounces “Ecogenocide” and Exposes the Expansion of Agribusiness in Matopiba.](#)

²⁶ Antonio Rafael da Silva Junior. [Quilombola territories: land tenure insecurity and murders in Maranhão.](#)

²⁷ Global Justice and Land of Rights. [On the Front Lines: Violence Against Human Rights Defenders in Brazil: 2023](#)

GmbH – is responsible for more than 69% of Maranhão’s RTRS volume. The port of Itaqui (MA) holds RTRS chain-of-custody certification for exports²⁸.

This project enters the European market as a response to sustainability requirements and as an argument against stricter regulation. Cargill, which certifies 47 locations in the Matopiba-Itaqui corridor through RTRS, claims to be “committed to a deforestation-free supply chain”; however, the corporation is implicated in serious allegations of human and territorial rights violations in various locations across Brazil²⁹.

While farms in Balsas receive the RTRS “zero deforestation” seal, Maranhão leads in Cerrado deforestation and accounts for 82% of pesticide contamination in Brazil. The RTRS does not monitor what happens outside the boundaries of the certified farm: it does not cover the cleared babaçu palm groves in neighboring communities, the contamination of rivers that flow through traditional territories, or the spraying of fields belonging to coconut breakers, Quilombolas, and Indigenous peoples³⁰. The RTRS does not monitor the effects of this production on the illegal appropriation of land traditionally used by communities. The RTRS certifies the farm and certifies practices within the audited perimeter, but ignores the territory where the farm operates.

RTRS certification does not require, as mandated by International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169, prior, free, informed, and good-faith consultation with traditional communities whose territories are affected by agricultural expansion. It does not monitor the use of pesticides on surrounding properties nor verify the land tenure status of the lands. The soy is audited by certifying bodies hired by the producers themselves. And yet, this is the standard that traders such as Cargill³¹ and Bunge use to assure the European market that their soy from Matopiba is sustainable, even though Maranhão has the highest rate of pesticide contamination in Brazil and leads the Cerrado in deforestation.

The questions that the European Parliament and consumers need to ask are: Was the soy arriving at the port of Rotterdam with RTRS certification produced in the same state where 82% of Brazil’s pesticide contamination cases occurred in 2024? If so, how is it possible for these two realities to coexist? The coexistence of these two realities in

²⁸RTRS. [The RTRS Sustainable Soy Corridor is now a reality in MATOPI](#)

²⁹ Idem.

³⁰ Reporter Brazil. [Drones account for 94% of pesticide contamination in Maranhão.](#)

³¹ Reporter Brazil. [With operations ranging from farming to processing, the giant Cargill has been linked to deforestation, the use of slave labor, and other human rights and environmental violations](#)

the same state, along the same logistics corridor, and within the same market is not just a contradiction – it is the very architecture of greenwashing.

The European Anti-Deforestation Law: why it needs to be stronger to protect forests and the Cerrado

The European Union Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) is the most important tool available for Europe to stop financing the destruction of Brazilian biomes. But, as it is currently designed, it has a structural loophole that leaves the Cerrado and its peoples unprotected.

The problem lies in the scope of the EUDR, which uses the limited definition of forest established by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), requiring tree cover of more than 10% and trees taller than 5 meters. This definition excludes most of the ecosystems in the Cerrado of Maranhão: savannas, open fields, rocky fields, trails, coconut groves, and babassu groves – ecosystems that are not forests in the botanical sense but that sustain biodiversity and the ways of life of coconut breakers, quilombolas, and indigenous peoples of Maranhão and the entire Cerrado.

According to MapBiomas (2022), 74.1% of the Cerrado's native vegetation does not meet the FAO's definition of forest. This means that 85% of the loss of native vegetation in the Cerrado between 2000 and 2019 occurred in areas not protected by the EUDR³². The soybeans marketed as “sustainable” in Balsas and throughout Maranhão are produced precisely within this gap.

Recommendations

What the European Parliament and European consumers should do to protect the Traditional Peoples and Communities of Maranhão and the Cerrado:

1. Expand the EUDR to cover non-forest ecosystems, including babassu palm groves and savanna vegetation. The ongoing revision of the EUDR provides an opportunity to address this key shortcoming. The concept of “natural ecosystems” should replace the FAO definition, ensuring that deforestation and the conversion of babassu palm groves, grasslands, and savannas are covered by the regulation – not just the deforestation of dense forests.
2. Include the territorial rights of Traditional Peoples and Communities (TPCs) as a condition of due diligence. The due diligence required by the EUDR must verify

³² MapBiomas. [Technical Note: Potential Impacts of Due Diligence Criteria on the Protection of Threatened Non-Forest Natural Ecosystems in South America.](#)

whether supply chains have respected the rights of Traditional Peoples and Communities, including the non-contamination of their territories, the non-destruction of their shared natural resources (water, soil, and vegetation), and the non-violation of the right to free, prior, and informed consultation (ILO Convention No. 169).

3. Suspend the Sustainable Soy Alliance project (GIZ/Government of Maranhão) and any “sustainable soy” certification in the region.

4. Reject private certifications as sufficient evidence. The European Parliament must determine that private certifications such as the RTRS are not sufficient to prove compliance with the EUDR. Independent due diligence must include territorial monitoring, consultation with affected communities, and verification of land tenure.

5. Prohibit the export of pesticides banned in Europe. The Parliament must pass binding legislation prohibiting the export to Brazil of pesticide substances banned in the European Union, and support initiatives to declare Brazilian Law No. 14,785/2023 unconstitutional (ADI 7701).

6. Strengthen local initiatives to ban aerial spraying of pesticides by airplanes and drones throughout Brazil and ensure compliance with municipal laws already enacted.

7. Strengthen mechanisms to support initiatives calling for a total ban on spraying in the vicinity of indigenous lands, Quilombola territories, and traditional communities, while respecting the right to free, prior, informed, and good-faith consultation.

8. Enforce binding legislation in the EU, Switzerland, and European member states to halt the export of banned pesticides and impose human rights due diligence on the soy and corn supply chains and other agricultural commodities.

9. Creation of a solidarity fund for the mitigation and redress of harm caused to victims of pesticide exposure and biodiversity loss.

10. Effective enforcement, civil, administrative, and criminal accountability for violators, comprehensive health care for exposed populations, and full redress for communities affected by pesticides.

11. Support Brazilian civil society initiatives to protect traditional territories and human rights defenders, such as the implementation of the National Program for the Reduction of Pesticides (PRONARA) to support the agroecological transition in Brazil.

12. Do not ratify the EU-Mercosur Agreement without binding conditions. The Agreement expands the European market for soy and meat produced in Brazil without

binding mechanisms for environmental, territorial, or human rights protection. It must be suspended until it includes: (a) effective trade sanctions for environmental violations; (b) a ban on products linked to land grabbing or violence against communities; (c) an obligation to conduct prior, free, and informed consultation with affected communities.

13. Support land regularization as a condition for conservation and for Europe to assume historical responsibility for the devastation of ecosystems and the violation of territorial rights in Brazil. EU-Brazil cooperation instruments must include explicit support for the regularization of quilombola territories, indigenous lands, and Extractive Reserves in Maranhão and the Cerrado. Without territorial security, Indigenous peoples, Quilombolas, and coconut breakers cannot protect the babassu groves. And without the babassu groves, both the Cerrado and the Amazon region of Maranhão will cease to exist.

What is happening in the state of Maranhão is not a side effect of poor development. It is systematic extraction with colonial roots – seeds, land, water, biodiversity, and the traditional knowledge of these peoples are transformed into commodities, traded through acts of violence against the bodies, territories, and ways of life of the peoples of Maranhão and the Cerrado.

Europe bears historical responsibility for this process and can – and must – be part of the solution.

TECHNICAL DATA

Publication Organization

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