

**New
Internationalist**

Problems

New Internationalist Upper Intermediate Ready Lesson

This lesson:

Speaking

Reading

Writing

Before you read, look at the photos and the title

Questions:

Which country?

What news?

When?

Why?



Title:

**'Why Brazil does not
learn from its mining
catastrophes'**

Summary

In January 2019, a big wave of mining waste killed at least 165 people, and 155 people are still missing, in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. Nick Terdre asks: why has nothing changed since Brazil's last environmental disaster?

Why do you think?

1) What happened and what were the effects?

Marino D'Angelo Junho lived below the Fundão dam near the town of Mariana, also in Minas Gerais state, when it burst on 5 November 2015. When the dam collapsed, it made a big wave of mud along the 620km of the River Doce. 17 days later a lot of it was in the Atlantic Ocean. Nineteen people were killed soon after and around 1.4 million people were affected.

Marino was working in his kitchen garden when someone phoned his wife to tell her about the collapse of the dam. They didn't panic. The dam was 80km away in Fundão – how much harm could it do? They'd never even heard of it before. They didn't know there was more than 56 million cubic metres of mining waste in it, 1,200m above sea level. They didn't know that people had often said they were afraid that the dam would collapse.

Marino smelled and heard the mud before he saw it. 'There was a terrible smell of oil, and an awful noise. I stayed inside for 10 minutes and when I tried to leave, I could not get out of the door of the living room of my house,' he says.

'What we expected was water but what arrived was something from another world. A huge brown wave.'

'The mud was like concrete – a thick mix of mud and sand. It destroyed so many bridges, trees and buildings.'

2) How has Marino's life changed, and who is responsible?

Marino still cries when he tells the story. He had a successful small farm with 70 cows, and he was president of the local milk producers' association. His wife grew fruit and vegetables on their land in the village of Paracatu de Cima.

Before, he earned R\$10,000 (over \$2,500) per month. Now he only has a minimum wage the mining company give him of R\$1,115. He sold most of the cows because the new land they gave him was bad quality and it's now difficult to find workers, as most people have left the village.

The disaster has also had serious effects on Marino's mental health. Before the dam broke, Marino says, he didn't take any medication. Now he takes three anti-depressant medications and he's diabetic. Before he was happy to work. Now, he can't work for more than two days.

His wife, Maria has lived all her life by the River Doce. The river is now red because of the mining waste. Maria now has a panic disorder.

The iron-ore mine belonged to Samarco, a joint business between the UK-Australian firm BHP and Vale (the Brazilian company that owns the dam that collapsed recently). There was more waste than they expected, partly because the iron ore was lower quality, and also because they increased production because of decreasing world iron prices.

3) What will happen now?

After the disaster, Samarco set up the Renova Foundation to repair the damage and pay compensation. Many people had to fight to get compensation and thousands of people have received no money yet. Renova has not allowed them to help make decisions, and has not been accountable with the money. If they got money, it was very little – a small payment each month, often to the man of the family. Women received less. Three years later, there are no new houses and no full compensation paid for people who lost work. Many people do not know if their life will ever return to normal.

‘The crime wasn’t only on the 5th [of November 2015],’ Marino says. ‘It affects us every day and things are getting worse.’

The criminal trial is progressing very slowly. 21 people are accused, but there is only one judge and many delays. There are many more witnesses for the defence than for the prosecution. The mining companies are so powerful, that it is even difficult to find independent science labs to study the water quality of the River Doce.

A big problem is corruption. This meant the companies did not need to follow safety standards. If they do not change a lot, there is a big risk of more tragedy. 45 more dams are at risk of collapsing. And many are not inspected regularly.

Jair Bolsonaro, the new president of Brazil, said he will fight corruption, so this will be a test for him. But many people do not trust Bolsonaro, because he attacked the environmental agencies in Brazil.

MAB (Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens - Movement of People Affected by Dams) wants Brazilians to support the families who are suffering after the Brumadinho collapse. The MAB said that they demand justice in this crime, that people must be punished this time for the deaths of people, animals, rivers and the environment.

Role-play

A) You are Marino:

You have a meeting with the President – prepare some notes

To tell him:

What happened? / Why? /
What you want him to do?

B) You are Jair Bolsonaro,
President of Brazil

Someone who suffered from the dam collapse is coming to see you

Prepare some questions to ask him

In pairs, write a letter of complaint to the mining company, Vale:

First, decide:

- a) How you will lay out your letter
- b) How you will begin the letter – why are you writing?
- c) 3 main points to make – one paragraph for each
- d) How you will end your letter

You can refer to the article:

<https://newint.org/features/2019/02/18/why-brazil-fails-learn-its-mining-catastrophes>

(original version), or:

[https://eewiki.newint.org/index.php?title=Why Brazil does not learn from mining catastrophes](https://eewiki.newint.org/index.php?title=Why_Brazil_does_not_learn_from_mining_catastrophes)

(Easy English version)

Useful language:

I am writing to complain about ...

I am extremely angry about ...

We desperately need ...

The most terrible thing about the disaster was ...

Another important point is ...

Finally, I would like to state that ...

If Vale had ...

I look forward to receiving ...