



***Statement by 2020 Goldman Environmental Prize winner Lucie Pinson.***

We can win the climate war.

Extreme weather events are accelerating and intensifying, further impoverishing those least responsible for global ecological disaster and fueling social tensions amid rising nationalism. The Arctic is melting, California and the Amazon are on fire, floods are hitting here and drought is raging there. Many are turning to political and economic decision-makers. However, after decades of environmental struggle and so many successive movements—including the last one started by Greta over a year ago—the big change still hasn't happened.

And yet...

We can win the climate war.

I did not believe this for years. Like many others, I could not see what I, alone, “a nobody,” could do about this unfolding catastrophe and these growing injustices. Should I devote myself to humanitarian emergencies caused by the dysfunctions of our societies? Modifying my lifestyle was obvious, but what else?

And then I discovered the most polluting sector in the world: finance.

Finance is at the heart of our economic system. Without it, no activity would be possible. However, despite all the goodwill—affected or sincere—of so-called sustainable finance, mainstream finance is fueling the climate catastrophe.

Banks, insurers, and investors direct the majority of their services toward the development of practices doped up with fossil fuels. Finance today is complicit in the overexploitation of natural resources and serious human rights violations. In my country, France, former President François Hollande proclaimed, “the enemy is the world of finance.”

But no, the enemy is what I call the “culture of defeat.”

Perhaps the greatest evil of our societies is not to wipe out the living and destroy our environments, but to make people believe that we cannot change our fate. What can we do in the face of hierarchy, competition, capitalism, the “system,” human nature, and so forth? Everyone has their reasons for thinking that they are powerless; everyone has their own mountain making them feel small. Individual behaviors change, but this defeatist culture leads many to give up on changing the rules of the game, even before trying. The majority tend their gardens or stammer their disagreement at the coffee machine. The minority involved, whether NGO employees or CSR managers, limit themselves to the

roles expected of them. Here, we argue and make demands that are more symbolic than useful; there, we give the appearance of being a responsible company without creating initiatives that have real impact but are, instead, disruptive. We clean up the base camp, but we never tackle the climb.

We can win the climate war, but on the condition that we do not remain witness—or party—to the climate catastrophe. This is not inevitable. How do you climb an unscalable mountain? One step after another.

This is what I decided to do in 2013 when I joined Friends of the Earth in one of the many battles to fight if we are to win the climate war: stopping fossil fuels. To do this, we must first turn off the tap: bring about a complete shutdown of financial services to these industries. Just as the climate war is the greatest challenge facing mankind, this battle seemed far beyond my reach, for the simple reason that I didn't know anything about finance at the time. In Paris, I was facing some of the biggest banks, insurers, and investors in the world—worth trillions of dollars. All of them overwhelmingly supported coal, the industry responsible for millions of deaths and the number one source of greenhouse gas emissions.

But we can win the climate war.

Today, I am honored to receive the Goldman Environmental Prize. Alongside my colleagues, both French and international, I have put all of my energy into convincing these players, one by one, to adopt new and ambitious measures aimed at stopping coal. It didn't happen all at once, but in stages. With education, negotiation, and struggle—bank by bank, insurer by investor—and always with one conviction in mind: each victory in isolation will not be enough to keep global warming below 1.5°C but will immediately save lives; and each victory is essential in the long-term to win the climate war.

After French banks became the first in the world to stop financing new coal mining and power plant projects starting in 2015, AXA was the first, in 2017, to no longer insure new coal projects and to cease investing in companies that, far from being satisfied with existing coal, intended to worsen the climate and health situation by building new coal-fired power stations. In 2019, Crédit Agricole adopted the first comprehensive exit policy for the entire coal sector. Milestones have followed one another and, today, nearly 20 major financial players are on the way to effectively supporting the phase-out of coal at the international level.

At each step, I was first told, “it's too complicated, we'll never be able to do it,” or, “it's impossible, we would shoot ourselves in the foot,” or, “it's unrealistic and will never be approved by my superiors, it is not even worth trying.” But, then, the impossible became an option before being finally adopted. Taking risks was essential to these victories, but they could not have happened without the conviction of people, individually and collectively, that they can make a difference.

The Goldman Environmental Prize, awarded to six individuals each year, demonstrates that each of us can snatch, piece-by-piece, the victories that are necessary to win the climate war. Yes, the world is a mess. It is up to all of us to reject this. We must not let ourselves be trapped by the culture of defeat, which is slowly killing us. Every time someone takes a step, we are winning the climate war.

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