JOINT LETTER

Prevent a ‘Climate Lehman Moment’

The collapse of Lehman Brothers triggered the last global financial crisis. There’s a new threat on the horizon, yet a simple way to step back from the point of no return.

Brussels, 27 October 2021

To,

Irene Tinagli, Chair of the European Parliament Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON)
Pascal Canfin, Chair of the European Parliament Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI)

A copy of this letter has been sent to the political group coordinators of the ECON and ENVI committees:

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Right now, we run the risk of another financial crisis, this time caused by climate change. Climate scientists from around the world warn that global warming is dangerously close to being out of control. There is global recognition that this crisis also threatens the stability of our financial system. And yet, despite net-zero emission pledges, most banks and insurers remain on a self-destructive path. They perpetuate the risks of climate change by financing and insuring fossil fuel-related activities.

As the climate meltdown unfolds, financial institutions will face losses stemming from disruptive weather events, which intensify and increase in frequency. Examples abound, such as recent heavy flooding in Europe, a terrible instance of multi-billion dollar damages from catastrophic, climate change-related forces. Such events are leading to huge unexpected payouts by insurance companies and to the destruction of assets and business operations that banks and insurers are exposed to. Moreover, frequent natural disasters are driving up premiums for insurance coverage, leaving citizens, businesses and financial institutions exposed to climate change related risks.

Furthermore, with the transition to a low-carbon economy, fossil fuel assets of banks and insurers will rapidly diminish in value or become entirely worthless. This will lead to massive losses for financial institutions, which could result in them requiring bailouts, where the public is the one to pay.

The truth is: we already have six times more fossil fuel reserves than we can afford to burn. Even the International Energy Agency (IEA) stated that if we want to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement, investments in new fossil fuels must stop immediately. This was recently echoed by United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

Therefore, any financing and insurance of new fossil fuel exploration and production is:

- extremely risky, as new fossil fuels will lose their value.
- at odds with the Paris Agreement.

An immediately feasible solution

If a bank or insurer still wants to venture into an activity that explores and produces new fossil fuels, they should be constrained to take the entire risk of funding this activity on their shoulders. Policymakers should introduce a One-for-One rule for stability: Every euro/dollar/pound etc. of financing provided must be matched by one euro/dollar/pound of institutions’ own funds, to be held liable. Their own funds should be sufficient to fully absorb losses without exposing depositors, policyholders and ultimately tax payers and society to the losses they will inevitably incur.

Capital requirements for existing fossil fuel financing should also be increased, albeit to a lesser extent than that for new fossil fuels. This will allow the financing for existing fossil fuels to be phased out gradually, without jeopardising financial stability.

Such prudential regulation would:

- protect those who entrust their money with financial institutions, and prevent a potential financial crisis
- protect taxpayers, whose funds would otherwise be used in a bail-out scenario
- mitigate the risks of climate change in the first place, as the incentive in current prudential rules to finance fossil fuels, which equates to a subsidy, would be removed

Capital regulations for banks and insurers already mandate higher capital charges for high risk exposures. All we need to do is to make sure that fossil fuel exposures are recognised as high-risk within the existing rules.

This idea has been endorsed by a panel of 50 sustainable finance experts from across academia, civil society, commercial banks, central banks and the investor community.
At the moment, financing and insuring coal, oil and gas projects remains artificially cheap. The capital levels that banks and insurers must maintain to cover potential future losses do not match the risks of these exposures. The lack of action so far is grounded in a paradox: Policy-makers and supervisors recognise the near impossibility of modelling climate-related risks due to the radical uncertainty of climate events. But they say they need such modelling to be done before intervening. By waiting for these impossible calculations, financial regulators extend an indirect subsidy to climate change-causing industries.

We cannot wait. The climate clock is ticking. Other interventions on their own will not have the impact we need to prevent irreversible devastating impacts of climate change on the financial system.

European leaders have committed to mobilise and promote the channeling of capital towards sustainable investments. But as long as there is an effective subsidy for fossil fuel financing, it undermines and counteracts this objective of the European Green Deal and Renewed Sustainable Finance Strategy.

There is an opportunity for decisive action: The EU is reviewing its prudential regulation for banks and insurers. Simple tweaks to the Capital Requirements Regulation (CRR) and Solvency II Directive (SII) can avert a possible ‘Climate Lehman moment’.

We urge you to secure the game-changing initiative of the European Parliament, so that this pivotal proposal can come into force.

Yours Sincerely,

111 organisations and 60 individuals, including civil society, ethical banks associations, economists and citizens (see full list below)

2. See for example: Villeroy de Galhau, F. (2020) The green swan, Foreword; LAGARDE, C. (2020) It is difficult to disagree that climate change is a threat to financial stability; and CARNEY, M (2015) Breaking the tragedy of the horizon – climate change and financial stability.


4. The world’s largest banks have provided $3.8 trillion to the fossil fuel industry since the Paris Agreement. For insurers, data shows that the largest U.S. and European insurers currently have invested around $600 billion in fossil fuels and the international insurance market for oil and gas totalled premiums of $17.3 billion in 2018.


6. German Insurance Association (GDV) (2021) data, for example, shows that 54% of properties in Germany lack any insurance coverage against weather phenomena.

7. Carbon Tracker (2018) data shows that existing fossil fuel reserves amount to 2910 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide emissions, whereas the calculated carbon budget of our planet is 495 gigatonnes.


9. Guterres, A (2021) Secretary-General’s statement on the IPCC report


11. In terms of prudential rules, this means that banks and insurers should be required to finance activities related to new fossil fuel reserves entirely out of equity (own funds). Equity acts as a buffer that absorbs losses from banks’ and insurers’ financing activities.


14. Finance Watch (2021) Amendments proposal to the CRR and SII
Signatories of our joint letter:

111 organisations and 60 individuals, including civil society, ethical banks associations, economists and citizens
Organisations

1. Finance Watch
2. The Sunrise Project
3. Climate Safe Lending Network
4. Public Citizen
5. New Economics Foundation
6. Reclaim Finance
7. ClientEarth
8. 350.org
9. E3G
10. Positive Money UK
11. Transport & Environment
12. Insure Our Future
13. Bürgerbewegung Finanzwende
14. ShareAction
15. WWF European Policy Office
16. Cop26climateactionplan.com
17. Change Finance
18. National Campaign for Sustainable Development Nepal
19. WEED - World Economy, Ecology & Development
20. Profundo
21. Fondazione Finanza Etica
22. ATTAC Liège
23. etka
24. Indigenous Peoples Global Forum for Sustainable Development, IPGFs4SD
25. Clean Air Action Group
26. 350 Seattle
27. Connecticut Citizen Action Group (OCAG)
28. Fundacja Rozwoj Tak – Odkrywki Nie
29. Re-set: plataforma pro socialně-ekologickou transformaci
30. ASUFIN
31. Climate Alliance Switzerland / Klima-Allianz Schweiz / Alliance climatique suisse
32. Revolving Door Project
33. Positive Money US
34. Majority Action
35. Sisters of St. Dominic of Caldwell, NJ
36. Sisters of Charity Federation
37. Ekumenická akademie (Ecumenical Academy)
38. BankTrack
39. Association of Ethical Shareholders Germany
40. As You Sow
41. KOTHOWAIN (Vulnerable Peoples Development Organisation)
42. Basel Institute of Commons and Economics
43. Rethinking Economics Australia
44. Fair Finance Institute  
45. Debt Observatory in Globalisation (ODG)  
46. Eerlijke Geldwijzer (Fair Finance Guide Netherlands)  
47. Attac Togo (Lemou)  
48. Attac Spain  
49. Change Partnership  
50. Freedom from Debt Campaign Pakistan  
51. WEAll - the Wellbeing Economy Alliance  
52. Association For Promotion Sustainable Development  
53. Gestos (soropositividad, comunicación, género)  
54. Fondation Nicolas Hulot  
55. Attac Germany, Financial Markets & Tax Working Group  
56. Rural Area Development Programme (RADP)  
57. RIHRDO (Rural Infrastructure and Human Resource Development Organization)  
58. Positive Money Europe  
59. Global Policy Forum  
60. Attac Austria  
61. Institut Veblen pour les réformes économiques  
62. Grands-parents pour le climat / Klima-Grosseltern CH  
63. Galway One World Centre  
64. Observatorio Mexicano de la Crisis  
65. Financié  
66. revo Prosperidad Sostenible  
67. Waterkeeper Alliance  
68. FractTracker Alliance  
69. Polish Zero Waste Association  
70. Both ENDS  
71. Nipe Fagio  
72. Finance Innovation Lab  
73. NOVACT  
74. Ban SUP (Single Use Plastics)  
75. Servicios Ecumenicos para Reconciliacion y Reconstruccion Millsersville University  
76. Talousdemokratia – Economic Democracy Finland  
77. Africa Europe Faith & Justice Network  
78. European Federation of Ethical and Alternative Banks and Financiers  
79. Fund Our Future  
80. Lithuanian Consumers Alliance  
81. Our New Economy  
82. AfroLeadership  
83. Jamaa Resource Initiatives  
84. Iraqi Journalists Rights Defence Association  
85. Institut Rousseau  
86. Bio Vision Africa (BIVA)  
87. Escape-jobs pour l’emploi sans carbone  
88. Zukunftskonvent, Germany  
89. Waterkeeper Alliance  
90. FracTracker Alliance  
91. Polish Zero Waste Association  
92. Rural Area Development Programme (RADP)  
93. Positive Money Europe  
94. Global Policy Forum  
95. Attac Austria  
96. Institut Veblen pour les réformes économiques  
97. Grands-parents pour le climat / Klima-Grosseltern CH  
98. European Trade Union Confederation  
99. urgewald  
100. Sustainable Value Investors  
101. KooalaKollektiv  
102. Leave it in the Ground Initiative (LINGO)  
103. Global Peace and Development Organization  
104. Les Amis de la Terre France / Friends of the Earth France  
105. Fundación Finanzas Éticas  
106. Campax  
107. NOAH- Friends of the Earth Denmark  
108. Rainforest Action Network  
109. Global Alliance for Banking on Values  
110. ZEF: Cooperative for ethical financing  
111. Better Markets  

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4. Ann Pettifor, Economist  
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22. Neil Lancaster, Senior Lecturer for Business and Law, De Montfort University  
23. Nicolas Franka, Economist  
24. Pierre Ozer, Professor of Environmental Sciences and Management, University of Liege  
25. Helena Paul, Researcher of biodiversity and climate change, EcoNexus
… among a growing number of economists, influencers, citizens and campaigners who support us.