

ECONOMIC AND FUND REVIEW

In Q3, markets continued to rise, somewhat surprisingly given that COVID cases also increased, with Europe seeing a particularly marked surge in August. Despite this, fewer deaths point to a better understanding of the virus. In general, economic data were positive, with greater momentum seen in regions with fewer restrictions. US consumer spending was surprisingly strong and fiscal support strengthened growth in the euro area and the UK. Tensions between the US and China resurfaced, with threats to ban TikTok from the US over privacy concerns. Equity markets continued to rebound through July and August, with the S&P 500 reaching fresh highs in early September, before retracing. On the fixed income side, gilt yields increased, especially at longer durations, while corporate spreads continued to tighten on continued monetary support.

During the quarter, agricultural manufacturer Deere & Co performed well, following results that showed an improvement in margins, outlining the increasing adoption of agricultural technology. Timberland company Weyerhaeuser also performed well, after delivered a strong set of Q2 results, with earnings higher than consensus. The company saw a good recovery within its wood products business and weaker domestic volumes within timberlands were offset by strong China exports. Aramark and Daikin also contributed.

On the flipside, packaging company DS Smith detracted. It released its FY2019/20 results to the end of April, which were largely as expected. Revenue and volume growth were both down, and having cancelled its interim dividend, the board announced it will not reinstate the dividend for FY 2020. Japanese pharmaceutical company Shionogi also detracted following disappointing results. Social distancing has reduced the occurrence of seasonal flu, which has weighed on sales of its flu drug Xofluza. ASML and Jack Henry also disappointed.

In terms of portfolio turnover, we bought HDFC Bank, Merck & Co and Jack Henry. We sold Activision Blizzard and Fresenius.

OUTLOOK

Whilst social distancing strategies are more relaxed than they have been and a return to full lockdown seems unlikely, economic and market conditions will not return to how they were before: international trade flows and supply chains have been permanently disrupted in places; balance sheets have been damaged, requiring gradual repair or rights issues; many dividends will not return to previous levels and share buybacks have been reduced. In the longer term, technology disruption will accelerate; consumer attitudes will be very cautious; collectively, governments will be less able to stimulate recovery than after the financial crisis; weaker economic growth will leave some companies struggling to grow sales and profits; investors will be more aware, and cautious, of social and environmental 'negative externalities' and poor corporate governance; affected shares will trade on lower valuation multiples. For all these reasons, it is a time to remain vigilant and not to be complacent. Our focus will be on investments that can generate secure and growing cashflows over the long term.

In the immediate term, positive economic momentum and supportive fiscal spending will provide an impulse to corporate earnings. Monetary spending (e.g. QE) and interest rates at the zero bound will allow refinancing opportunities for companies to invest at more affordable levels. In addition, there are numerous opportunities driven by the shift to a more digital world, in new automation, climate change mitigation and adaptation, demographic trends and by shifts in consumption patterns in both the emerging and the developed markets. These themes can surpass the broad measures of GDP growth and the challenges triggered by the coronavirus. We are re-examining every sub-theme and there may be some changes of emphasis, but the high-level themes will continue to provide a strong underlying investment framework, providing us with the reassurance that the majority of companies in the portfolio have good prospects beyond the current crisis.

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Important Information

Prior to 28th November 2016, the fund was named Sarasin EquiSar - Socially Responsible.

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There is no minimum investment period, though we would recommend that you view your investment as a medium to long term one (i.e. 5 to 10 years). The investments of the fund are subject to normal market fluctuations. **The value of the investments of the fund and the income from them can fall as well as rise and investors may not get back the amount originally invested.** If investing in foreign currencies, the return in the investor's reference currency may increase or decrease as a result of currency fluctuations. **Past performance is not a guide to future returns and may not be repeated.**

Frequent political and social unrest in Emerging Markets, and the high inflation and interest rates this tends to encourage, may lead to sharp swings in foreign currency markets and stock markets. There is also an inherent risk in the smaller size of many Emerging Markets, especially since this means restricted liquidity. Further risks to bear in mind are restrictions on foreigners making currency transactions or investments.

For efficient portfolio management the Fund may invest in derivatives. The value of these investments may fluctuate significantly, but the overall intention of the use of derivative techniques is to reduce volatility of returns. The Fund may also invest in derivatives for investment purposes.

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