

William Blair SICAV Global Leaders Sustainability Fund Summary and Outlook

Market Review

Global equities advanced in the fourth quarter (the MSCI ACWI IMI returned +9.84% for the quarter and -18.40% year-to-date in USD terms), marking the end to the worst year for global equities in more than a decade. Growth equities underperformed value-oriented equities (the MSCI ACWI IMI Growth returned +5.67% for the quarter and -28.24% year-to-date, while the MSCI ACWI IMI Value returned +13.98% for the quarter and -8.07% year-to-date) as equity markets rallied behind a more dovish outlook for Federal Reserve rate hikes and loosened COVID-19 restrictions in China. From a global sector perspective, energy was the only sector to outperform on a year-to-date period (+17.35% during the quarter and +34.10% year-to-date as measured by the MSCI ACWI IMI index), while consumer discretionary and communication services were laggards (+0.84% during the quarter and -30.99% year-to-date and +2.68% quarter-to-date and -35.29% year-to-date, respectively, as measured by the MSCI ACWI IMI index).

U.S. equities advanced during the period (+7.08% for the quarter and -19.61% year-to-date as measured by the MSCI USA IMI) as investor optimism was bolstered by the prospect of cooling inflation and that policy tightening would slow. Hopes for a near-term peak in the Fed tightening cycle were fueled by some positive developments on the inflation front, including cooler CPI prints for both October and November. While the latest CPI print for November slowed to 0.1% month-on-month, inflation remains elevated at 7.1% year-on-year. Nevertheless, the final Fed rate hike of the year was 50 basis points, a pivot from the four straight 75-basis-point increases in 2022.

European equities outperformed global markets for the quarter (+19.52% for the quarter and -16.71% year-to-date, as measured by the MSCI Europe IMI), capping off a difficult year, mainly from the fallout of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and subsequent energy crisis. Within the U.K., equities advanced (+17.24% for the quarter and -9.76% year-to-date, as measured by the MSCI United Kingdom IMI), following a turbulent September. On the political front, former Prime Minister Liz Truss stepped down and Rishi Sunak from the Conservative Party was appointed. Similarly, Europe ex-U.K. advanced (+20.28% for the quarter and -18.85% year-to-date, as measured by the MSCI Europe ex-UK IMI), aided by a rally in the fourth quarter amid hopes that cooling inflation would sway central banks.

Emerging markets gained (+9.50% for the quarter and -19.83% year-to-date, as measured by the MSCI EM IMI index) broadly across countries. Chinese equities rebounded (+13.83% for the quarter and -22.03% year-to-date) on news of the relaxation of the zero-COVID policies, which helped boost optimism for economic growth in 2023. Similarly, Latin America returns continued to advance (+5.45% for the quarter and +7.26% year-to-date, as measured by the MSCI EM Latin America IMI), bolstered primarily by Argentina (+32.68 for the quarter and +35.91% year-to-date, as measured by MSCI Argentina) and Mexico (+13.47% for the quarter and flat for the year). Brazil, which outperformed for most

Top 10 Holdings as of 12/31/2022

| <i>Company Name</i> | <i>% of Fund</i> |
|---|------------------|
| Microsoft Corp. | 3.3 |
| Mastercard Inc. | 3.1 |
| UnitedHealth Group Inc. | 3.0 |
| Alphabet Inc. | 2.7 |
| Ulta Beauty, Inc. | 2.7 |
| Novo Nordisk A/S | 2.6 |
| Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc. | 2.6 |
| Compass Group PLC | 2.5 |
| Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company Ltd. | 2.3 |
| AIA Group Ltd. | 2.3 |
| Total Top 10 | 27.1 |

of 2022, underperformed on a relative basis in the fourth quarter (+1.37% for the quarter and +10.31% year-to-date, as measured by MSCI Brazil IMI) amid investor concerns about President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's plans to ramp up fiscal spending. EMEA gained (+6.65% for the quarter and -25.62% year-to-date, as measured by the MSCI EM EMEA IMI) despite weaker returns from Qatar and Saudi Arabia (-14.43% during the quarter and -7.37% year-to-date, as measured by MSCI Qatar IMI, and -7.32% quarter-to-date and -5.13% year-to-date, as measured by MSCI Saudi Arabia IMI), impacted by weaker energy prices.

Fund Performance

The William Blair SICAV Global Leaders Sustainability Fund outperformed its benchmark, the MSCI ACWI IMI during the fourth quarter. From a sector perspective, allocation effect was negative, driven by overweight in information technology and an underweight in energy. Stock selection added value primarily within the consumer discretionary and financials sectors, partially offset by negative selection within industrials and communication services.

Consumer discretionary stock selection was bolstered by investments in Nike and Ulta Beauty. Nike reported excellent corporate results, with sales exceeding consensus across all major geographic regions, though the beat in North America was the primary driver of outperformance. Gross margin came in higher than anticipated and inventory started to moderate. Encouragingly, revenue growth within China was positive. We believe Ulta is well positioned in the structurally attractive beauty category, benefiting from the continued channel shift away from department stores, strong user activation/engagement, and an expanding portfolio with newness and a higher mix of prestige brands and skincare products.

Ulta has a resilient business model characterized by a balanced product offering with a wide breadth of appeal across categories, price points, digital brands, and services. Its strong digital capabilities, coupled with an attractive in-store retail experience, have made Ulta's business more defensible against the likes of Amazon. The stock performed well as the company had three consecutive quarters of beating earnings expectations and raising forward-looking guidance.

Within financials, AIA Group contributed to relative outperformance. AIA is a leading life insurer in Asia whose shares jumped in the fourth quarter following a rebound in new business value, particularly in China and Hong Kong following the easing of pandemic-related restrictions. We believe that AIA will continue to benefit from strong secular growth as a result of rising affluence, low insurance penetration, and favorable demographics given its strong brand and distribution.

Industrial's selection was negative, largely driven by Daikin Industries. Daikin is the world market share and technology leader in the global air conditioning market. Recent results were strong, but management raised its forward-looking earnings guidance by less than the market expected, leading to a pullback in the stock. We believe that management is being conservative given the macro backdrop and we are confident in its growth outlook.

Within communication services, performance was hampered by Alphabet. Alphabet's bottom-line has been negatively impacted by the macro environment and it plans to offset margin pressure by slowing hiring in 2023. We have confidence in Alphabet due to its sustained leadership in core Google Search, a highly profitable business enabling significant reinvestment in both the existing ecosystem and earlier-stage adjacencies. Continuous innovation and scale have led to network effects and access to large quantities of unique data, enabling highly-effective advertising opportunities. Alphabet is also a beneficiary of secular growth in digital advertising, a \$300 billion addressable market growing 10%-15% annually. At a forward-looking P/E multiple of 17 times, we continue to find the stock attractive.

Positioning

During the quarter, exposure to healthcare was reduced through the sale of Edwards Lifesciences, whose reported and forward-looking earnings recently came in below market consensus. The primary growth driver for Edwards, its TAVR (transcatheter aortic valve replacement) business, slowed dramatically in 2022, leading to downward revisions in earnings expectations and underperformance of the stock. Information technology was also reduced via liquidation of Adobe, which we believe faces structural fundamental headwinds with best-in-class margins likely past their peak. In addition, we believe that the acquisition of Figma is a defensive move that hurts management credibility. Financials was increased by purchasing Zurich Insurance and Bank Rakyat Indonesia. We view Zurich as the defensive stock within European financials. The Farmers Exchange part of the business also provides an inflation hedge. Bank Rakyat Indonesia is the leading micro lender in Indonesia and benefits from a strong branch and mobile distribution network, which has led to strong compounding of book value driven by robust micro loan profitability. The bank remains an expanding growth story and should benefit from increasing penetration and rising wealth in Indonesia. Industrials was also increased via purchase of Wuxi Lead Intelligent Equipment, which primarily designs and manufactures production equipment for large format batteries used in electric vehicles and grid-level power storage.

Short-term macro headwinds have been priced in, driving the forward-looking P/E multiple to an all-time low, but in our view the long-term outlook remains fundamentally attractive and provides a long-tail of earnings. From a regional standpoint, exposure to the U.S. was decreased, while emerging Asia and Europe was increased.

Outlook

Our outlook has two primary elements: first, the current cycle and the implications for markets in 2023. Second, we address the bigger issue, relating to the developing likelihood we have begun to shift into a different economic and market environment, marking a different era than we have seen in the decade-plus post the Global Financial Crisis (GFC).

2023

We likely experienced peak rates of inflation during the fourth quarter and thus as price increases abate, we may be finally nearing the end of the central bank tightening in the coming months. However, while perhaps peaking, inflation is likely to remain above the historically low levels experienced during the last decade. Tight labor markets and slowing rate of globalization are probable key culprits.

inflationary forces, and even if we are at the tipping point of the current tightening cycle, it is quite possible that interest rates remain at levels above what we have been used to seeing during the post-GFC era.

Regarding economic growth, there is great debate about whether a recession in the U.S. can be avoided, but the precision is not relevant. It's clear to us that we are and will be in a slowdown during the first part of the year, and that will be felt even deeper in Europe.

Corporate earnings growth is projected to be slower in 2023 than 2022, and consensus estimates still appear too high in our estimation. The market started to acknowledge this in the fourth quarter of last year, and we expect that will pick up in the first months of this year.

China is a different story, as growth should accelerate as they emerge from extended COVID-related lockdowns. However, we expect growth will be uneven, and not as strong as we have seen elsewhere given there hasn't been as much fiscal support to boost consumption.

Interestingly, pent-up travel demand from China is likely to contribute more to persistent inflation than is generally understood. We expect that close to 300 million of China's population could be traveling abroad in the next several quarters, buoying demand for goods and services outside of China increasing inflation volatility—one of the reasons we believe inflation may prove to be stickier this year.

With that backdrop—lower but elevated rates of inflation, interest rates remaining above that seen in the last decade, and sluggish economic and corporate profit growth—it will remain a difficult equity market to navigate. While the big move in valuation occurred in the early parts of 2022, we still believe valuation will remain a powerful factor, in other words market returns will be a function of earnings growth rather than valuation.

The nature of this environment, and the potential for shifts in where we might find future earnings growth, in 2023 and beyond follows in the next section.

A Changing Investment Era?

We postulate that the period post the Global Financial Crisis was anomalous, and going forward we expect we could experience marginal shifts to the investing environment that would suggest an era dating back to prior decades rather than merely reverting back to the 2010s.

It's been well documented, but worth noting, that the unusual shock to the global economy and markets resulting from the financial crisis led to a decade of extremely accommodative monetary policies, lowering interest rates to historic levels.

The period was also unusual in that the expansion was quite protracted, intermittently lasting for most of the decade. We witnessed the continuation of globalization and China's ascension into the world's second biggest economy, with still high (>6%) rates of growth as key drivers. Not to mention continuation of innovation and productivity enabled by the digitalization of many areas of the industrial and consumer economy.

Thus, we experienced a long, albeit low growth, expansion accompanied by very modest inflation. This ultimately led to a period of strong returns for equities and risk assets, as "TINA"—there is no alternative—took hold in a low (zero) interest rate environment.

This ballooned during the pandemic, once it was clear to the markets that global central banks were going to do whatever was necessary to keep economic demand from plummeting. The bubble was pricked in 2022, as inflation and rates accelerated at an historic rate.

Beyond this year, there is no reason to believe that underlying real structural growth will be materially different than what we have seen in the prior decade. If anything, there may be slight risks to the downside.

As mentioned earlier, inflation and rates have shifted upward, and we think the forces that caused this may be beyond just this current pandemic-influenced economic cycle. We are loath to bet that these will revert to recent lows in the near future, as the move from quantitative easing to quantitative tightening is just underway.

Why is this macro view important? Because it sets the stage for corporate performance, but also perhaps more importantly market leadership. We believe the environment has changed enough that market leadership will be broader in the coming years as compared to the pre-pandemic era.

We look to previous central bank tightening cycles for some perspective. Our analysis shows that post the peak of prior tightening cycles, inflation remains sticky, persisting up to two years, corporate earnings growth recedes, and valuation remains a dominant factor. This is likely to be the case for the intermediate-term investing period.

Despite this backdrop, we still believe companies that persistently out-earn their cost of capital, grow their asset bases with high returns on invested capital, and innovate to solve customer needs will be attractive investments. But as we experienced post the dot-com bubble, the market needs to recalibrate expectations. We have experienced the first phase of this in 2022 but expect that it could take the next few years for this to fully materialize.

We think diversity of growth, industries, and business models at appropriate levels of valuation will make for optimal portfolio construction and investment returns. This is different than most of the 2010's, where concentrated investment strategies optimized for maximization of expected growth, in a small number of industries, with in many cases similar business models outperformed massively. We have seen these before, the Nifty Fifty of the 1970's and the tech bubble of the 1990s.

Each of these periods were symbolized by concentration of market leadership and a narrowness of what was favored—at the extreme expense of almost everything else. This really isn't reflective of longer-term market environments characterized by much more breadth and diversity in both the real economy and the markets.

Looking forward, we believe there should be opportunities for growth equities from numerous sources. Marginal changes to growth rates, in both directions, will likely drive investment performance. Companies with superior capital allocation strategies should prove to be attractive. We believe the delivery of cash flows will be favored over promise of growth, in other words, lower versus longer duration. Quality, cash flows, and predictability will likely be favored. "Old economy cyclicals" that were left for dead (commodities, financials) may continue their resurrection.

As growth equity investors for now close to three decades, we welcome this shift back to "normal" as breadth and diversity of investment ideas have been a hallmark of our success.



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Fund Information

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The Articles of Incorporation, the Prospectus, the KIID, the Annual and Half-yearly Reports of the Fund and the Subscription Form are available free of charge in English and German from the website sicav.williamblair.com or at the registered office of the Management Company (33, rue de Gasperich, L-5826 Hesperange, Grand Duchy of Luxembourg), at the registered office of the Fund (William Blair SICAV, 31, Z.A. Bourmicht, L-8070 Bertrange, Grand Duchy of Luxembourg) or from the Swiss representative, First Independent Fund Services Limited, Klausstrasse 33, CH-8008 Zurich, and in German language at Marcard, Stein & Co., Ballindamm 36, 20095 Hamburg, Germany, and at Bank of Austria Creditanstalt AG, Am Hof 2, 1010 Vienna, Austria. Paying agent in Switzerland is NPB New Private Bank Ltd, Limmatquai 1, CH-8024 Zurich.