

The fund was up 4.8% last quarter, ahead of its (CPI + 2%) benchmark of 0.6%. This was mainly as a result of positive performance from our yield assets. The fund has returned 7.9% pa over the last five years (3rd best fund), ahead of its benchmark of 6.0% pa. Since its inception in 2011, the fund has returned 8.3% pa.

With the unexpected pandemic market shock now more than a year behind us and materially changed economic prospects for the companies and economies in which we invest, we are pleased with the extent of our fund's rebound and outperformance.

Economic backdrop

Rapid rollout programs of (very effective) vaccines have substantially progressed in many developed markets, with laggard countries (like Germany and Japan) rapidly catching up. This is allowing a faster return to more normal activity in those regions, limiting further scarring in services sectors (particularly tourism and leisure). Unfortunately, several less wealthy nations are enduring continued heavy Covid-19 impacts, accompanied by slow vaccine rollouts. This is delaying their economic recoveries. It currently appears that the rate of vaccine rollouts is insufficient to contain the virus worldwide and, with mutations occurring where the virus is raging, it is likely that negative economic effects will endure for an extended period of time.

Developed market consumer and corporate health appears to have been largely preserved through extensive and ongoing fiscal and monetary support. Labour markets are reasonably healthy and are thus far showing resilience where government sponsored furlough schemes are ending. In the USA, the level of fiscal support has increased further this year and is currently providing a positive and enduring boost for the global economy. In the near-term it seems that many developed economies are growing at above trend levels post their pandemic recoveries. Nevertheless, sustainable economic conditions may be visible only when fiscal support and monetary stimulus meaningfully tapers off more meaningfully and the reality of permanent job losses manifests.

Following a rapid resumption of economic activity back to pre-crisis levels, the Chinese economy is once again growing strongly. This is largely due to the successful early containment of the pandemic, government stimulus (which boosted infrastructure and residential investment in particular) and surprisingly strong exports and manufacturing activity. Initially exports were buoyed by temporary Covid-19-related goods demand and thereafter sustained by improving global activity. Consumer spending has recovered (showing reasonable growth off pre-crisis levels) but confidence remains lackluster. Pre-crisis risks, however, remain - a disruptive moderation and rebalancing of economic growth (away from fixed asset investments and towards consumption) and potential further deterioration in geopolitical relations.

The local economy has continued to recover, with consistently high commodity prices (particularly platinum group metals and iron ore) significantly supporting economic outcomes and the agricultural sector remaining buoyant. However, with an ineffective vaccine rollout, recurring Covid-19 variant surges continue to hamper the recovery of our services sectors. South Africa is lagging the global recovery considerably, showing signs of permanent economic damage from the lockdown and years of state mismanagement. We suffer from a very depressed labour market, unstable electricity supply, weakened and tax-hungry municipalities and chronically low business and investment confidence. For these reasons, we remain pessimistic regarding the structural growth rate for the local economy (which we believe has severely weakened in recent years) and have been wary of extrapolating a short-term cyclical growth rebound too far into the future when valuing cash flows.

While economic revival plans are well articulated, they still rely too heavily on implementation from weakened state institutions and do not draw sufficiently on private sector participation. However, recent actions to liberalise private sector electricity production are a step in the right direction. In addition, actions to rebuild crime fighting and tax collection capabilities are advancing, although still far from sufficient and far too slowly. A full post-crisis economic recovery will take meaningfully longer than the rest of the world due to the inherent structural weaknesses of the South African economy, with increased risk due to unsustainably high sovereign debt.

The shocking and tragic recent looting unrest and resultant sapping of business confidence and economic damage (particularly in KwaZulu-Natal) are another reminder of the long-term structural growth impediments we face. Recurrent social instability and unrest is an unfortunate inevitability given very high levels of unemployment and inequality.

The medium-term outlook for developing economies varies widely at present, with differing exposures to volatile energy prices (importers versus exporters), strong other commodity prices, decimated tourism industries and differing impacts from the management of the pandemic and progress of vaccine rollouts. Due to recovering domestic demand and some signs of increased inflation, policy interest rates have started normalising higher in these economies from the extraordinarily low crisis levels.

Market review

Global markets were once again strong this quarter (up 7.9% in US dollars), with France up 10.0%, the UK up 5.7% and the USA up 8.5%. Within emerging markets (up 5.1% in dollar terms), Brazil (up 23.8%) and Russia (up 14.4%) outperformed, while South Africa (down 1.3%) lagged. Over the last 15 months global equity markets have recovered very strongly from the March 2020 lows (up 67% overall).

In rand terms, the local equity market was flat this quarter, with mid-caps (up 5.9% for the quarter versus large-caps that were down 0.8%) still underperforming since the start of 2020 (down 0.9% versus large-caps up 18.8%).

Resources shares underperformed this quarter (down 5.2%) following an extended period of outperformance. Anglo Platinum (down 23.4%), AngloGold (down 17.5%) and Northam Platinum (down 15.7%) underperformed, while Glencore (up 6.8%), Anglo American (down 0.7%) and BHP Group (down 1.2%) outperformed within this sector.

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Industrials were flat (up 0.1%) – heavily influenced by weakness in Naspers (down 15.1%). Standout positive performers included Richemont (up 21.9%) and retailers (Dis-Chem up 41.4%, Foschini up 30.0%, Pepkor up 24.6% and Truworths up 20.6%). Telecommunication stocks were also strong, with MTN up 18.9% and Telkom up 9.5%. MultiChoice (down 9%) and British American Tobacco (down 1.3%) were other laggards.

Financials outperformed (up 8.1%), with listed property (up 12.1%), banks (up 9.6%) and life insurance (up 5.8%). Investec Plc (up 26.4%), Nedbank (up 22.1%) and Capitec (up 20.0%) outperformed, while Ninety One (down 10.9%), Coronation (down 7%) and Quilter (down 6.8%) underperformed.

Extremely high developed market fiscal and monetary stimulus measures are providing a powerful support for financial markets and have led to dramatic increases in general asset prices. We expect increased volatility and weakness in many now buoyant areas when fiscal stimulus inevitably wanes, if sustained inflation emerges at last and when interest rates rise from their extremely low levels.

SA bonds returned 6.9% for the quarter, continuing their strong recovery. Cash returned 0.9% for the quarter and global bonds generally strengthened. US Treasuries in particular, rose in the quarter as growth expectations were perhaps lowered, given the Covid-19 persistence. Foreigners continued to be net sellers of SA bonds in this quarter.

The SARB seems to have reached the end of its path of easing, keeping the repo rate at 3.5% at the July meeting. There is likely to be some near-term negative growth impacts that have resulted from the recent unrest in SA. However, over the medium term, inflation is expected to remain benign (despite higher food and oil prices) and base effects (causing higher current inflation) should recede in the coming months.

Fund performance and positioning

Very strong performance from our yield assets (bonds and property) were the main contributors to performance.

Material equity contributors this quarter included RECM & Calibre, Omnia, MTN and Caxton. Our PGM miner holdings (Anglo Platinum and Northam) and Naspers were the main detractors.

Our global equity holdings contributed negatively to performance. Detractors included Siemens Energy, Prudential and Fiserv, whereas Spire Healthcare, Nisshinbo, Kinder Morgan and M&G positively contributed.

- We have more exposure to ultra-long South African government bonds than in recent years, due to highly attractive real yields on offer, despite the very weak fiscal position of the country.
- We remain guarded on corporate credit exposure, given the weak SA economy and low credit spreads on offer, with exposures mainly in short-term credit instruments of well-capitalised financial companies.
- We remain highly selective within listed property, although maintain high exposure to certain preferentially positioned A-shares.
- We maintain a high level of equity market hedging, given generally high market levels, and to enable high gross exposure to our best stock picks, with the lower net equity exposure, befitting a lower risk multi-asset class fund.

It is evident that companies with stronger balance sheets, better business models and flexible, more adaptable management teams are outperforming in the recovery period and we believe the outperformance will be even more pronounced in the weaker economy in the years ahead. We are maintaining exposure to such companies, at the right price.

Our portfolios contain a diverse selection of local mid-cap holdings offering very attractive upside.

Within equities, we maintain our high exposure to low-cost, growing PGM miners. We expect a sustained acute shortage in PGM metals when global economic activity normalises, due to structural supply impediments, demand from tightened emission regulations, increased jewellery demand and a rapidly growing hydrogen energy sector. Current share prices offer very attractive near-term free cash flow yields, even if commodity prices are lower.

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