

M&G Global Balanced Feeder Fund

Global Multi-Asset ZAR-denominated

Q4 2023

Market overview

The final quarter of 2023 saw a synchronized rally across global bonds and equities as falling inflation in many economies led central banks to continue to pause or effectively end their interest rate hiking cycles and start to look towards rate cuts, particularly in the US. And, although a growth slowdown is still expected in 2024, this and the gradually improving outlook buoyed investor sentiment, resulting in strong gains in November and renewed bullishness in December, to end the year with unexpectedly good asset performance.

December's returns were dominated by the US Federal Reserve's unexpectedly positive forecasts at their 13 December policy meeting as, besides leaving interest rates on hold, they clearly indicated their expectations for three 25bp interest rate cuts in 2024. This was very good news for both equity and bond markets, helping bolster the 2024 outlook despite the uncertainty still surrounding the cumulative negative impact from the steep rate hiking cycle. Other large central banks also left interest rates on hold at their December policy meetings as expected.

Global equity (as measured by the MSCI ACWI) delivered 11.0% in Q4, emerging market equities returned 7.9% (MSCI Emerging Markets Index) and global bonds produced 8.1% (Bloomberg Global Aggregate Bond Index, both in US\$).

For 2023 as a whole, global equities returned an excellent 22.2% in US\$ and 32.3% in rand (due to rand depreciation), with gains fairly concentrated around a handful of giant global AI-related US companies. These outpaced other US shares and, indeed, most other equity markets for the year, making the US meaningfully more expensive than its global counterparts. This also reflected the relative vitality of the US economy versus most other large economies. By contrast, Chinese growth disappointed and equities were in the red.

Global bonds experienced a very volatile year, marked by rapid shifts in the interest rate outlook that pushed the yield on the benchmark 10-year US treasury bond to 5% (briefly) in October and left it trading around 3.8% at year-end, presenting opportunities for active investors to harness attractive above-inflation yields. Ultimately, global bonds returned 5.7% for the year.

United States

In the US, the Fed's December forecasts for 2024 showed inflation falling gradually toward its 2% target amid a slowdown in growth, without steep job losses -- in other words, a "soft landing" as investors have hoped for. Unemployment is seen rising to 4.1% from its current 3.7% level, still low from a historic perspective, and GDP growth is forecast to average 1.3% for the year. Meanwhile, at 3.1% y/y, November CPI was in line with expectations and down from October's 3.2% y/y, helped by lower energy prices over the period.

For the quarter, the Dow Jones produced 11.7%, the Nasdaq 13.1%, and the S&P 500 13.8% (all in US\$). The Nasdaq was the top-performing developed equity market in 2023 with a remarkable return of 44.6%.

UK

In the UK, the Bank of England (BoE) kept its main interest rate unchanged at 5.25% at its December meeting, saying its next move would remain data-dependent, but the market is pricing in the start of rate cuts from June 2024. November CPI fell sharply to 3.9% y/y from 4.6% in October. The UK economy is on the verge of recession, having recorded zero (0%) GDP growth in Q3 2023, and with the BoE downgrading its growth forecast for 2024 to 0% from 0.5% previously. For Q4 2023, the FTSE 100 returned 14.4% in US\$, and for the 12 months it produced 14.4%.

Eurozone

In the eurozone, inflation continued to fall during the quarter, with the latest November CPI at 2.4% y/y% nearing the ECB's 2% target rate. However, the central bank's latest forecasts show inflation improving only very slowly going forward and averaging 2.7% in 2024 from 5.3% in July. GDP growth in the area registered a paltry 0.1% y/y in Q3 2023, and is expected to remain very subdued at 0.8% y/y in 2024. In contrast to the Fed, the ECB remained hawkish, continuing to warn of upside inflation risks from energy prices and labour costs, and discounting the possibility of interest rate cuts in the foreseeable future. In European equity markets, France's CAC 40 returned 10.5% in Q4 and 24.4% for 2023 as a whole, while Germany's DAX delivered 13.6% in Q4 and 24.5% for the year (all in US\$).

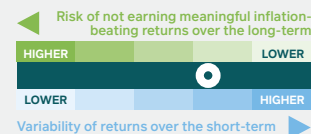
Japan

After impressive growth in the first half of the year, Japanese GDP shrank by a more-than-expected 2.9% in Q3 2023 (annualised, revised) as consumer and business spending contracted and real wages fell due to prolonged relatively high inflationary conditions. The sharp slowdown came despite the Bank of Japan maintaining its ultra-easy monetary policy, which had provided firm support previously and also helped push the local equity market to 33-year highs in December. The latest conditions suggested that the BOJ will continue to keep interest rates exceptionally low, in line with the central bank's goal of keeping inflation sustained at around 2% and avoiding deflationary conditions. The Nikkei returned 11.4% (in US\$) for Q4, and 22.6% in 2023.

China

During the three months, the Chinese economy gained traction with Q3 GDP growth reported at a stronger-than-expected 4.9% y/y (vs 4.4% y/y forecast). Although this means that the government is likely to meet its 5% GDP growth target for 2023,

Risk profile



Fund facts

Investment manager of the underlying fund

M&G Investment Management Limited (UK)

Fund managers of the underlying fund

Craig Simpson
Aaron Powell

ASISA category

Global - Multi Asset - High Equity

Benchmark

65% MSCI All Country World Index TR (Net), 5% FTSE EPRA/NAREIT Global REIT Index, 25% Bloomberg Global Aggregate Bond Index, 5% US 1m Treasury Bill

Inception date

28 June 2018

Fund size

R1 245 973 259

Annualised performance

	A class	Benchmark	B class
1 year	24.1%	26.1%	24.5%
2 years	5.9%	5.3%	6.3%
3 years	11.2%	10.7%	11.4%
5 years	12.0%	13.3%	12.1%
Since inception	9.8%	11.8%	-

the absolute level of growth has continued to disappoint. The country's exports remained under pressure from relatively weaker foreign demand, but looser monetary policy from the People's Bank of China (PBOC) has added stimulus through lower bank rates for its medium-term lending facilities.

There was positive news with November data showing industrial production grew faster than expected at 6.6% y/y (versus 5.6%), up from 4.6% y/y in October, and retail sales growth of 10.1% also improving significantly from 7.6% the previous month. Pent-up consumer demand continues to underpin the expansion, along with consumer services, while the property sector remains in crisis and youth unemployment high. Chinese markets were still in the red in Q4, with Hong Kong's Hang Seng returning -3.7% and the MSCI China -4.2%, both in US\$. For the year, the Hang Seng produced -10.6% and the MSCI China posted -11.0%

Emerging markets

With the exceptions of China and Turkey, larger emerging equity markets performed very strongly over the quarter. Brazil's Bovespa soared with a return of 18.6%, followed by South Korea's KOSPI with 13.9%, the MSCI South Africa at 12.7% and the MSCI India at 12.0% (all in US\$). The MSCI Turkey fell 12.1% (both in US\$).

Currency

The rand gained 2.7% against a weaker US\$ for the quarter, but for 2023 in total depreciated 8.2% against the US dollar, 14.1% versus the UK pound and 12.1% against the euro as sentiment toward SA remained depressed.

Performance

For Q4 2023, the fund produced a return of 8.1% (net of fees), compared to the 7.1% recorded by its benchmark. For the 12 months to 31 December, the fund delivered 24.1% versus the benchmark's 26.1% return.

The fund benefited from the strong performance of equity, fixed income and property markets over the quarter. Our core equity exposure, chosen by our machine learning model, outperformed on 30 out of 65 days during the quarter, offering an unfavourable hit rate of around 46 %. However, this drag was more than offset by positive skew, i.e. the contribution from outperforming days more than offsets the lag from underperforming days.

Our style exposure in equities proved to be a significant positive contributor over the quarter, with exposures to high beta, high residual volatility and low momentum all contributing to performance, while exposure to smaller cap companies detracted. Stock selection had a modest negative impact over the quarter.

In terms of tactical equity exposure, emerging market stocks in Asia and Latin America, European equities and US financials were also beneficial to returns. However, our short position in the US stock market weighed on performance, as did exposure to China.

In fixed income, the long duration positioning from our core fixed income exposure was the main contributor to performance in the quarter. In terms of our tactical fixed income positions, the main contributor to returns was from US Treasuries, with support from UK gilts.

Our property exposure, also managed by a machine-learning model, outperformed on 40 out of 65 days during the quarter, offering an attractive hit rate of around 61 %. This more than offset the slightly negative skew, resulting in outperformance. The majority of outperformance came from stock selection, with overall style effects providing only a modest positive contribution. Within style, exposures to cheap valuation contributed to returns, while small size exposure detracted.

Strategy and positioning

Overall the fund's exposure to equities was increased and exposure to fixed income and cash was reduced marginally during the quarter, through reducing tactical exposure to emerging market bonds and UK gilts.

Outlook

The current consensus view is one of slowing US growth and Chinese economic malaise, which will lead to global growth dipping below 3% in 2024. In Japan, investors' eyes will remain focused on the Bank of Japan and a potential end to its so-called "yield curve control" policy and negative interest rates. Western Europe will continue to flirt with recession, with many economists seeing a mild recession in Germany and a flat-lining UK. In emerging markets, India, Indonesia and the Philippines are seen as better growth prospects.

Against a backdrop of slowing global growth, but a resilient employment market, we expect policy interest rates in developed economies to be on hold in the first half of 2024, with cuts in the second half. At the same time, we believe company profits will slow in line with the economy. □

Contact us

- ✉ info@mandg.co.za
- 🌐 mandg.co.za
- 📞 0860 105 775

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