

BlackRock

Portfolio perspectives
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Sustainability: The tectonic shift transforming investing

A framework for incorporating sustainable investing in
portfolio construction

BlackRock
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What's new in this paper

- A commonly held view is that a *return sacrifice* is necessary when adopting sustainable investing because the shift is already embedded in current market prices. We disagree.
- The fundamental point often overlooked is the concept of a long transition between now and a future state, driven by investment flows, as sustainability effects become embedded in market pricing. Because these flows are in their early stages, we believe that the full consequences of a shift to sustainable investing are not yet in market prices. Assets backed by high sustainability will become more expensive while others will become cheaper during the transition period, in our view, meaning that those holding sustainable assets will earn a *return benefit* during this transition.
- Many investors focus on what evidence of a sustainable investing impact can be found in historical data. We believe historical data does not tell us the full story: society will care much more about sustainability in the future than it has in the past, and this will be the key driver of investment flows and asset returns.
- The lack of historical data linked to sustainability makes it hard to quantify these effects. But we have observed other slow-moving, new trends that have had profound effects on asset prices in the past. Our work is grounded in the academic literature that finds financial markets are imperfect at pricing in information about the far-off future, even when the structural shifts – such as demographic changes – are well understood.
- Sustainability effects and societal attitudes will impact all assets and therefore the whole portfolio. The direct impacts of climate change and the coming capital reallocation will reshape economic fundamentals, expected returns and assessments of risk. Strategic asset allocation (SAA) decisions need to incorporate these implications in ways that go far beyond simply screening out certain stocks or securities. The lack of historical precedence makes it paramount to account for higher uncertainty when building sustainability-aware SAAs.

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A long transition just getting started

The past year has seen a marked shift in society's attitudes toward sustainability. This shift is spurring political pressure, a regulatory push and technological advancements to create the foundations of a more sustainable world, leading to a change in investor behavior and setting in motion a major yet gradual capital reallocation. Society's long transition toward the practice of sustainable investing is likely to drive market adjustments for years and even decades. Assets under management in dedicated environmental, social and governance (ESG) funds have tripled in the past decade to a little under U.S. \$1 trillion – and were on track to jump 50% in 2019 alone.¹ Yet this amount is a small fraction of the publicly investable universe – and a smaller fraction of the universe that includes private markets.²

The flows we have already seen are merely the early stages of a long transition and thus won't be captured in today's asset prices—akin to the multi-decade market impact of the post-war “baby boom.” **This tectonic shift has significant implications for the expected returns and relative pricing of assets – not just those perceived to be sustainable but for every asset in the investment universe. The consequences could not just alter existing return drivers or risk premia but create entirely new sources of premia.**

One commonly held view argues that sustainable investing is not going to offer much return opportunity to investors from a basic financial theory perspective. This view holds that today's prices should fully reflect the predictable component of future flows into sustainable assets – that is, the adoption of sustainable investing is already at a “steady state” reflected in current prices. Moreover, in the steady state, expected returns on sustainable investments are lower as sustainable investors are willing to settle for a lower reward on those assets for the same amount of risk. The implication of this view is that either: 1) embracing sustainability won't make much of a difference, providing cover to those thinking it can be ignored; or 2) there is a compromise between sustainable investing and return potential.

We believe the commonly held view is not just wrong but that the opposite will occur. **The coming capital reallocation is not yet in prices: this long transition in sustainable preferences and practices will make some assets more expensive (those with high sustainability) and others cheaper (those with low sustainability). This means that assets with high sustainability will be rewarded through the transition period, the opposite of what others posit.** This transition will not be reflected in historical data. We believe markets are a long way from fully pricing in the far-reaching consequences of changing attitudes toward sustainability: the impact will be more pronounced on some assets than others, and some assets will likely disappear altogether as sustainable preferences are embedded into market pricing. Why? Structural shifts are typically underappreciated for long periods of time by financial markets – as has been the case for demographic shifts such as the baby boom.

The flows tied to this persistent and long-lasting shift toward sustainability could see the emergence of a new dimension of return and risk. We see sustainability premia driving returns beyond other fundamental risk premia – equity, interest rate, credit, inflation – over the long transition period. The need to incorporate uncertainty is paramount. We would expect a wider range of outcomes, and this means we need to approach our return expectations with more uncertainty and reflect this in our portfolio construction. We believe returns for all assets will likely be different when market pricing starts to reflect the shift toward sustainable assets. The key is understanding the *opportunity* of assets that may benefit from the rise of sustainable investing, not just simply excluding those assets at risk.

What is sustainability?

Sustainable investing extends the best approaches of traditional investing by integrating insights about society, corporate behavior, climate and other non-traditional data to generate better long-term outcomes. The term sustainability is often applied to a range of strategies and labels. We acknowledge that investors' preferences and definitions of sustainability are not uniform. Yet this does not preclude incorporating sustainability in long-term portfolio construction. We distill client motivations into a spectrum of “avoid” to “advance”:

- **Avoid strategies** involve the elimination of certain issuers or sectors associated with increased ESG risk or violating the asset owner's values
- **Advance strategies** focus on increasing exposure to positive ESG qualities to align capital with certain behaviors or target specific “E” or “S” outcomes.

Improving tools that better measure sustainability-related factors are poised to meaningfully move the needle for the industry. Organizations like the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB) are helping to drive the industry to a consensus around a set of well-defined metrics. The Sustainable Industry Classification System (SICS) sits alongside the widely accepted four-tiered Global Industry Classification System (GICS) that uses financial metrics to determine a company's principal business activity. Over the next few years and decades, we believe ESG data will also become more of a common language amongst issuers and investors.

¹ IMF staff calculations using Bloomberg Finance data as of June 2019.

² The listed market capitalization of global public equity and debt markets stands at about \$130 trillion, according to a January 2020 estimate by JP Morgan.

Channelling change

There are three channels through which sustainability will change investment: profitability, risk and investor flows. The industry is typically focused on the first two: research has helped quantify the impact of sustainability on profitability and risk in different industries.³ Yet we believe the third channel is underappreciated – and far more important: the impact of major flows driven by the widespread adoption of sustainable investing during the long transition period.

In the first channel, higher sustainability may be a favourable signal of profitability and fundamentals going forward, potentially making it a source of alpha. The most profitable firms or advanced countries likely have more means to choose more sustainable practices and investment projects. And more sustainable practices may ultimately drive profitability as well. There is a long history of exploiting signals about firm and country quality to generate the expected returns used in a strategic asset allocation (SAA) decision. Incorporating sustainability signals in this way is what is typically done in practice.

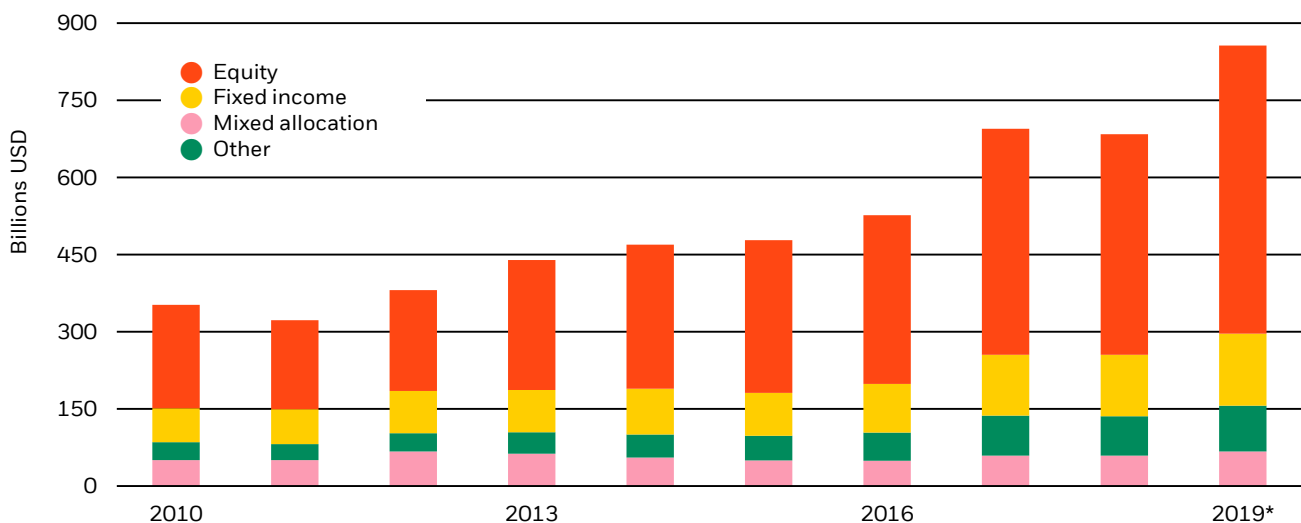
In the second channel, assets with lower sustainability may have more risk, especially from exposure to systematic negative tail events. The economic justification for that exposure is clear – low sustainability firms and countries are more likely exposed to the negative consequences of broad-based sustainability-related shocks, such as climate events. Modelling such a risk is a challenge as it requires making assumptions about a firm’s or country’s exposure without a history to rely on. While new models have made strides in modelling the macroeconomic effects of climate change, we cannot rely on history alone to understand these new phenomena.⁴ But we can use historical transitions, such as demographic changes, to calibrate similarly slow-moving effects. And case studies can be used to extrapolate from historical experience to the future.

We believe the third channel – persistent investor flows – is the most important one and will establish new sustainability premia in market pricing. An important consequence of substantial preferences for sustainability is that they ultimately affect the type of companies that comprise the investable equity universe. A company’s expected return drives the cost of capital associated with expanding its asset base, so companies with low perceived levels of sustainability may switch to more sustainable practices that are valued more highly by the market over time.

An emphasis on sustainability is a new phenomenon, so its potential effect cannot be seen in historical data. If the percentage of sustainable investors increases, the price of assets with higher sustainability will trend higher and the price of assets with lower sustainability will trend lower. That change will result in positive realized returns to portfolios tilted toward sustainability during the transition – until reaching the steady state when the repricing is mostly complete. The *Early stages* chart below shows how assets under management in dedicated ESG funds have grown over the past decade. Yet these remain a sliver of the overall investable universe. We believe these flows are just starting to pick up – and the repricing of assets is just beginning.

Early stages

Growth in ESG assets under management in U.S. dollars, 2010–2019



Sources: BlackRock Investment Institute, with data from the IMF, February 2020. Notes: Data are based on IMF staff calculations using Bloomberg Finance data. The data for 2019 are as of June, the latest available set. The chart shows global ESG mandated funds only.

³ In stark contrast to the neoclassical view of Lucas (1977), two influential papers by Gabaix (2011) and Acemoglu, Carvalho, Ozdaglar and Tahbaz-Salehi (2012) model the microeconomic foundations of macroeconomic shocks that arise because of idiosyncratic shocks to large firms or intersectoral input-output linkages respectively. Di Giovanni, Levchenko and Mejean (2017) show the relative importance of these economic channels in explaining how French value add comoves with value add in other countries. Du, Lou, Polk, and Zhang (2019) document the importance of network linkages in predicting and explaining a broad cross section of country level credit and equity returns.

⁴ See Bolton et al (2020). Though it is difficult to ascertain whether the expected outcome of those models is fully priced in market prices, these models can be used to understand the extent to which key drivers of prices (GDP) vary across scenarios and the extent to which some countries/regions are more exposed than others. Such information may be useful in adjusting one’s view of the uncertainty surrounding expected returns as well as facilitating more forward-looking estimates of asset class volatility.

All about the flows

Our argument that flows will drive a “sustainability wave” is about much more than just the idea that today’s youth and their preferences affect market pricing. Though this contributes to the story – as we discuss below – the sustainability wave and its market impact is about a broader shift in preferences spanning all generations and societies. Academic studies have found that financial markets are imperfect at pricing in information about the far-off future, even when the structural shifts are well understood.⁵ One influential study found stock returns were predictable based on demand changes tied to demographics.⁶ This study exploited shifts in tastes as people age (for example, from bicycles to medicine) along with persistent changes in demographics (the rise of the 1950s baby boom generation). The impact to industry profitability was predictable decades in advance, yet stock returns did not fully incorporate that information until much later. We believe the structural sustainability shift could be similar. **To be clear, the sustainability wave is not purely about demographics.** But it provides a parallel. Just as the baby boom generation’s impact on the economy and financial markets played out through taste preferences and wealth flows, the sustainability wave will play out over decades, remaking economies and industries as capital is reallocated.

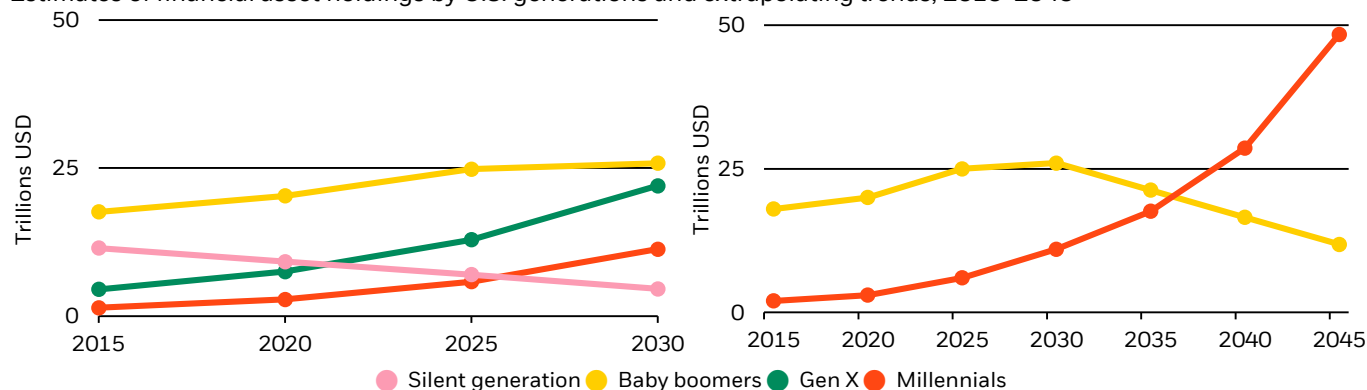
One contributing factor to the wave is, however, demographically induced: an ongoing transfer of wealth to a younger generation with greater awareness of sustainability. Millennials and Gen Xers are expected to gain a major share of assets, as the chart on the left shows.⁷ Yet looking out to 2030 doesn’t tell the full story, as the chart on the right highlights. In 10-15 years’ time, today’s millennials (born 1981-1997) and baby boomers (born 1946-1964) will be about as old as Gen X (born 1965-980) and the silent generation (born 1928-1945) are now. If we assume that millennial wealth will grow in 2030-2045 at a similar pace to that of Gen X in 2015-2030, we could see a very sharp increase. Using similar logic, we could see baby boomer wealth shrink in 2030-2045. Today’s youth are increasingly financial decision makers whose tastes tilt toward sustainable products – and sustainable investments.⁸ The first of these preferences may result in a potential profitability boost for sustainable firms. The second preference will directly result in the repricing of more sustainable assets relative to less sustainable assets.

Some might argue that the younger generation’s preference for sustainability may dampen if not reverse as they age. Yet academic literature underscores that the personal experiences of economic fluctuations play an important role in persistently shaping individual preferences, especially at a younger age.⁹ As our paper *Getting physical* highlights, the number of natural disasters causing U.S. \$1 billion-plus in damages has been on a steady rise. Major negative shocks related to sustainability – from hurricanes and wildfires in the U.S. and Australia, heat waves in Europe and flooding around the world – may result in a durable shift in the younger generation’s taste toward more sustainable assets.

As we have noted, a traditional application of finance suggests that if some investors care about sustainability, sustainable assets should have lower expected returns, all else equal.¹⁰ Such a view sees sustainable investing as a trade-off that sacrifices potential returns. By assuming that a steady state has already been achieved, changing sustainability preferences are already baked into current asset prices, *lowering* their potential returns. This view also underappreciates that some less sustainable investments will disappear altogether as society’s preferences and actions drive their value to zero. Our approach is the opposite: sustainable investing should power a market repricing during the long transition to that steady state, *rewarding* assets with high sustainability while *hurting or eliminating* other assets.

Wealth transfer – just one factor

Estimates of financial asset holdings by U.S. generations and extrapolating trends, 2015-2045



Sources: BlackRock Investment Institute, with data from Deloitte Center for Financial Services, February 2020. Notes: The chart on the left shows the distribution of investable financial assets across different generational cohorts as defined by Deloitte in this paper. The chart on the right shows a hypothetical rate of change in wealth applying the rate of increase between 2015-2030 of Gen X to millennials in 2030-2045 and applying the rate of change of the silent generation to baby boomers over the same period.

⁵ Darrell Duffie’s 2010 presidential address to the American Finance Association describes asset price dynamics caused by slow-moving capital.

⁶ DellaVigna and Pollet (2007) find abnormal returns of up to 8% a year, arguing that their findings are consistent with a model of inattention to information about the distant future.

⁷ Deloitte forecasts \$24 trillion (after taxes and charitable giving) in US household assets to transfer from 2015-2030. Longer term, the Boston College’s Center of Wealth estimates \$59 trillion – divided among heirs, charities, estate taxes and estate closing costs–will be transferred from 93.6 million American estates from 2007 to 2061

⁸ The 2017 BlackRock Global Investor Pulse survey found that 67% of millennials (born between 1982-1998) want investments to reflect their social and environmental values.

⁹ Malmendier and Nagel (2011, 2015) provide evidence that experiencing low stock returns or high inflation permanently affects investors’ behaviors with respect to those risks.

¹⁰ A list includes Heinkel, Kraus, and Zechner (2001); Fama and French (2007); Gollier and Pouget (2014); Friedman and Heinle (2016); Luo and Balvers (2017); Baker, Bergstresser, Serafeim, and Wurgler (2018); Albuquerque, Koskinen, and Zhang (2019); Pedersen, Fitzgibbons, and Pomorski (2019); and Pástor, Stambaugh, and Taylor (2019).

A systematic approach

While the transition period toward a new steady state could last decades, the resulting returns we expect during the transition should impact the SAAs built today. To meet these challenges, a portfolio construction framework needs to allow for:

- The impact of climate change and other **sustainability effects** on fundamental macro variables
- A clear link between the impact of these altered macro variables and the risk and return for **all assets**
- A means of allowing for the **time-varying** nature of the return and risk impact
- The creation of new **sustainability premia** that involves identifying factors that exhibit the sustainability premia and discounts within and across various asset classes
- A systematic means of building portfolios to reflect the inherent **uncertainty** applied to all future estimates

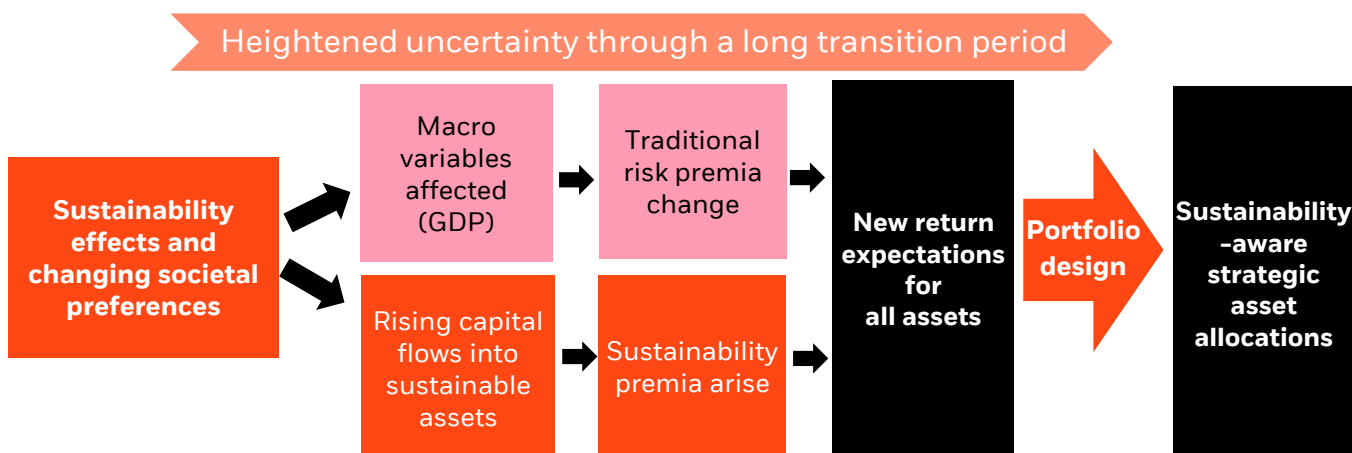
Our framework, illustrated in the schematic below, outlines how we are creating a set of sustainability-aware capital market assumptions (CMAs) that will lead to different risk, return, correlation and uncertainty expectations for all asset classes. This framework implies different SAAs as a result. Consider one solitary asset class as an example – the U.S. S&P 500 equity index. In a framework agnostic of sustainability, return expectations would be based on forward-looking estimates of macro variables, the relationships between these variables and fundamental drivers of return (earnings growth, valuations). In a sustainability-aware framework, we also take into account potential shifts – both within and among sectors – that could unfold with the adoption of sustainable investing. This return expectation would reflect revised macro estimates, sustainability effects and also be influenced by exposure to new additional systematic drivers of return – namely, sustainability premia. Now consider these effects across all asset classes. The absolute return and risk of each asset, and the relative preference of each asset in a portfolio context, will shift – leading to different SAAs.

Deriving a set of factors and rewards to sustainability – from which to create these new CMAs – is not trivial. Our flows-based concept is intuitive and drives the sustainability premia. The challenge is quantifying the impact. Our argument is built on the idea that what’s priced now doesn’t reflect what will be priced in the future. We instead identify exposures that capture sustainability using BlackRock’s proprietary sustainability metrics across asset classes. In our framework, whether these metrics have historically explained returns is secondary to whether they capture sustainability. To these identified exposures, we would ascribe a reward or discount by combining estimates of steady-state premia and the time-varying return impacts of the transition period until that steady state is reached. While quantification of this is difficult, there are different parallels from history which are informative. The pace at which markets price in slow-moving effects has precedent. For instance, ageing populations have contributed to a significant bid for domestic government bonds over recent decades, helping push government bond yields ever lower. In some regions, regulation has accentuated this effect – see UK pension reforms on asset-liability matching. The parallels with sustainability – society-wide trends augmented by regulation – are clear.

Techniques such as these are promising, but we need to acknowledge any approach will be inherently challenging and have limitations. Thus the **uncertainty** around these new CMAs would be larger and reflect this systematically in portfolio construction. This assumption chimes with former Harvard professor Martin Weitzman’s research into the difficulties of finding an appropriate discount rate to apply to economic models considering the structural uncertainty around phenomena such as climate change.¹¹ Together, these elements help us build resilient, sustainability-aware SAAs.

Structural shift in investment patterns implies sustainability premia

BlackRock framework for sustainability-aware portfolios



Source: BlackRock Investment Institute, February 2020. Notes: For illustrative purposes only. Subject to change without notice.

¹¹ Weitzman (2011) and Weitzman (2012) emphasized the importance of appropriately representing the uncertainty of global warming, the corresponding damages when estimating the impact of catastrophic climate change and the corresponding discount rate.

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