



# ACTIVE OWNERSHIP REPORT

ROBECO | 01.10.2022 - 31.12.2022

# Q4

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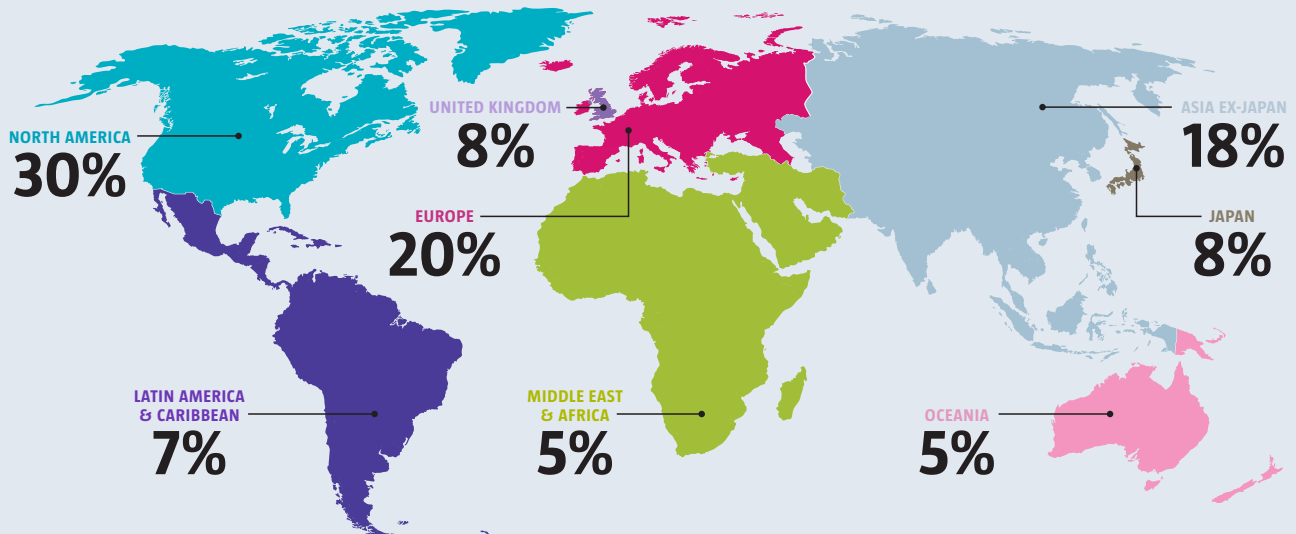
# 2022



Sustainable Investing Expertise by  
**ROBECOSAM**

# Q4|22 FIGURES ENGAGEMENT

## Engagement activities by region



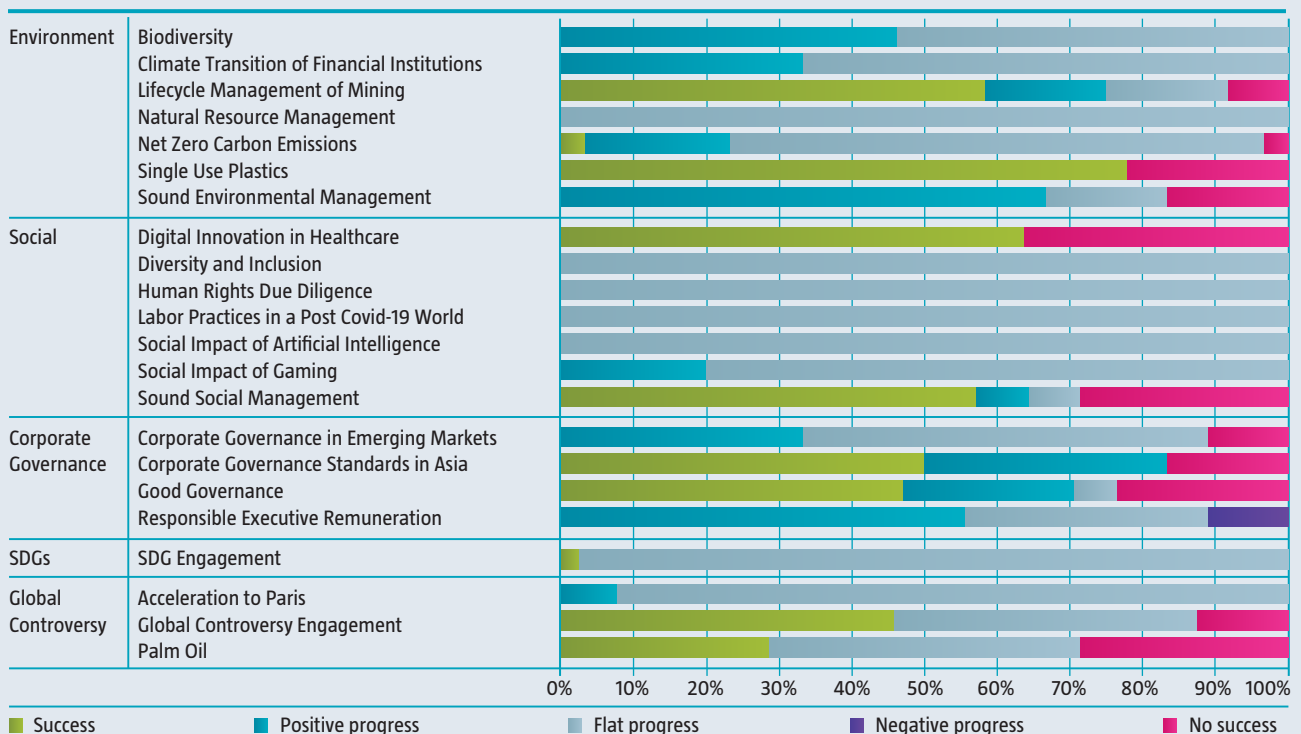
### Number of engagement cases by topic\*

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Environment	47	55	36	60
Social	20	26	21	21
Corporate Governance	19	20	12	21
SDGs	15	30	18	29
Global Controversy	25	19	13	20
Total	126	150	100	151

### Number of engagement activities per contact type

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	YTD
Meeting	1	1	4	16	22
Conference call	78	90	56	90	314
Written correspondence	88	125	76	114	403
Shareholder resolution	0	1	0	3	4
Analysis	16	27	19	46	108
Other	1	9	1	2	13
Total	184	253	156	271	864

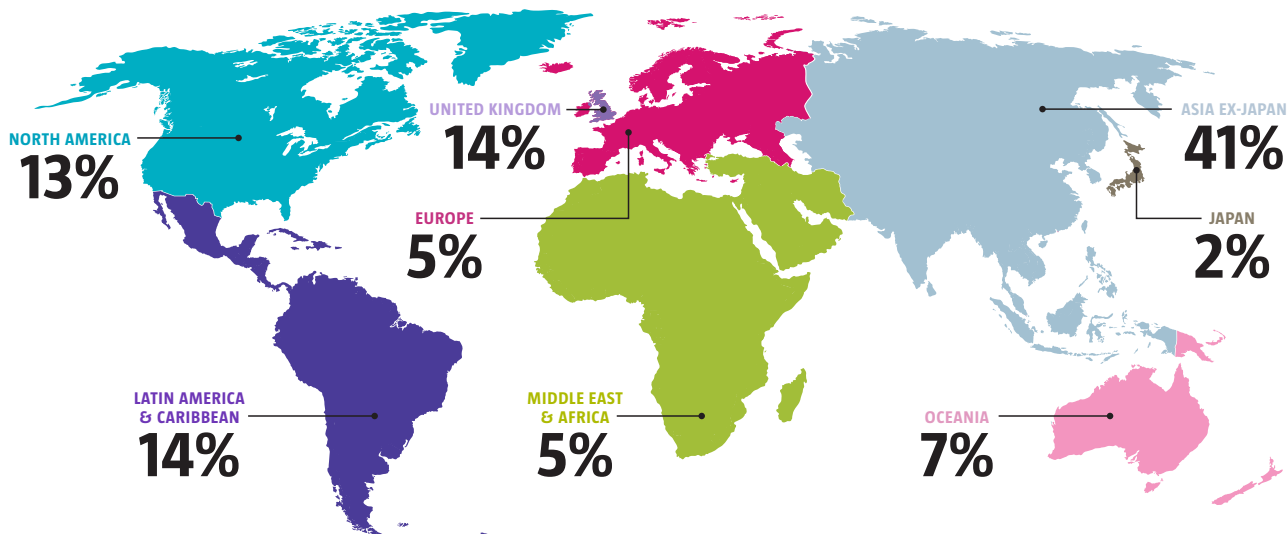
### Progress per theme



\* Due to a change in Robeco's methodology to account for engagement cases, numbers are expected to differ from previous quarters.

# Q4|22 FIGURES VOTING

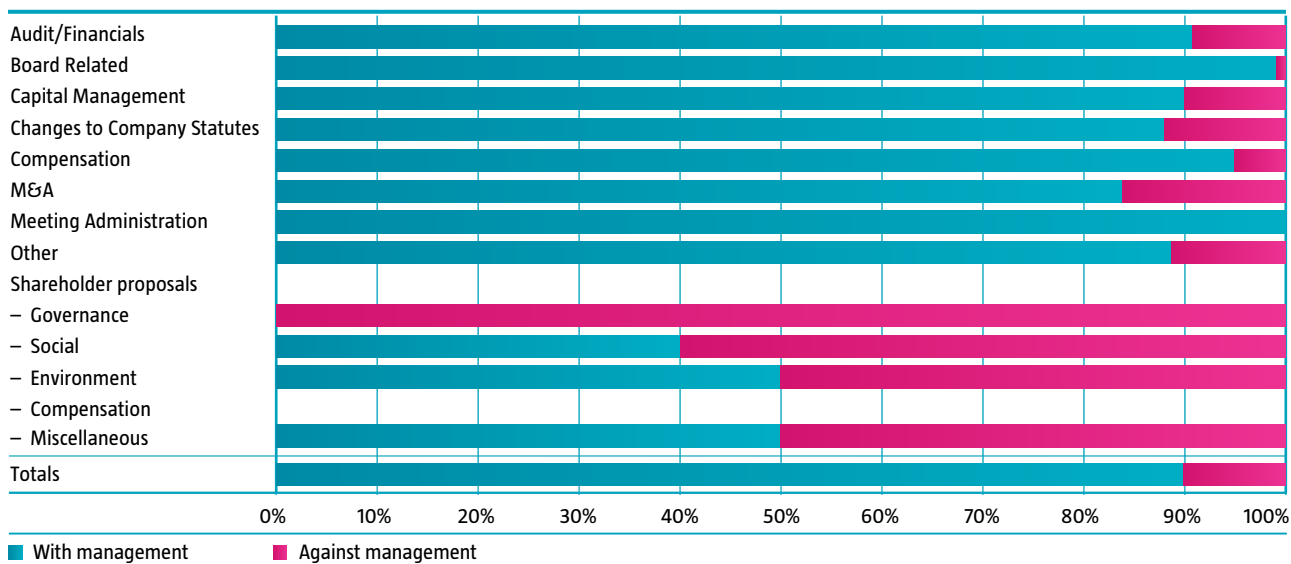
## Shareholder meetings voted by region



## Voting overview

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	YTD
Total number of meetings voted	101	725	160	162	1,148
Total number of agenda items voted	1,187	10,531	1,688	1,436	14,842
% Meetings with at least one vote against management	62%	76%	49%	38%	66%

## Votes cast per proposal category



# CONTENTS



## Social Impact of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence is increasingly shaping our lives, from science-fiction applications such as self-driving cars to mere operational efficiency, yet potential adverse impacts of such technologies are often overlooked. Engagement specialist Daniëlle Essink reflects on ICT companies' responsible AI use, as she is closing the theme Social Impact of Artificial Intelligence, sharing regulatory trends, best practices of AI testing and engagement outcomes.

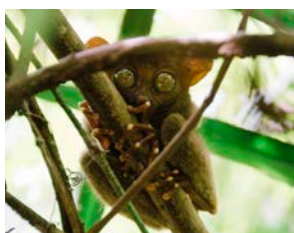
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## Social Impact of Gaming

Looking both on and behind the screen, engagement specialist Alexandra Mortimer is giving an update on our Social Impact of Gaming engagements, taking a critical look at the gaming industry. The engagement has already provided interesting results, from growing transparency on labor practices, active encouragements of responsible gaming behavior and stringent complaints mechanisms.

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## Biodiversity

As decision makers from across the world discussed how to end biodiversity loss during the UN Convention on Biological Diversity Conference, engagement specialist Claire Ahlborn reflects on Robeco's multi-layered approach to use shareholder rights to protect biodiversity, from collaborative corporate and sovereign engagements to collaboration with data providers to improve biodiversity data.

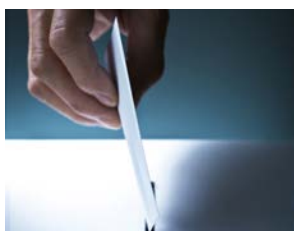
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## Corporate Governance Standards in Asia

In the Asian market, engagement specialist Ronnie Lim shares key updates on his engagement with Japanese policy makers and companies to reduce capital inefficiencies, increase board diversity and improve corporate disclosures.

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## Proxy Voting

Engagement specialist Diana Trif and Active Ownership Analyst Manuel Sobral reflect on some of 2022's key trends, from the growing shareholder activism in Australia to the critical topic of Anti-ESG shareholder proposals, the actors behind them and how to spot these misleading agenda items.

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# INTRODUCTION



Although there were turbulent times, we look back on 2022 as being another successful year for Robeco's Active Ownership activities. We have continued to grow the team and we launched several new engagements, next to this we enhanced the transparency and collaboration with our clients.

With the year having come to an end, so did our engagement on the Social Impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI), launched in 2019. The opportunities present in AI are often described as 'endless', though technology's growing and often unregulated presence in our lives brings along numerous social risks, ranging from systematic discrimination to surveillance and privacy concerns.

For three years, we have supported technology companies in creating holistically responsible AI frameworks to govern their technological development, deployment and end use. We successfully closed 40% of the engagements, with many of the companies having formalized responsible AI principles. They have shared how the principles of inclusiveness, fairness and transparency are being integrated into their developer trainings, enterprise risk management systems and board responsibilities. However, companies remain resistant to publicly disclosing their systematic responsible AI practices, a critical challenge as AI is starting to be regulated.

Staying on the topic of technology, looking both on and behind the screen, we reflect on the progress observed so far in our Social Impact of Gaming engagement. Over the last two years, gaming companies have taken significant

steps to address in-game harassment of players, ranging from AI-driven text filtering to extensive feedback loops. At the same time, game providers are seeking ways to improve their disclosures on social and environmental performance, with three out of the five companies under engagement having launched their first sustainability reports since we started our dialogues with them.

Meanwhile, stakeholders from across the world came together at the UN Convention on Biological Diversity Conference in Montreal in December to find ways to halt biodiversity loss and to address the associated environmental, social and economic harms. Eliminating biodiversity loss requires urgent multilateral action, from governments, companies and investors. In our update, we share the various ways in which Robeco addresses biodiversity loss and deforestation, through our engagement with the Brazilian and Indonesian governments that aim to strengthen no-deforestation laws, to our newly launched proxy voting policy targeting agricultural companies that are not living up to their environmental responsibilities. Finally, we report on the soft launch of the Nature Action 100 engagement collaboration, in which we take an active role. The collaboration focuses on the 100 companies deemed to be the biggest culprits in causing biodiversity loss.

Finally, we shift our focus to Asia, where we continue to engage policy makers and companies on key gaps in their corporate governance, including the low rate of female board representation and the systematic challenges around companies' annual disclosures. These corporate governance issues alongside other market and capital inefficiencies are believed to have significant impacts on companies' market valuations, highlighting the importance of investor engagement.

As we move into a new year, we reflect on the promises made by companies and governments towards safeguarding our planet, and are ready to play our part in moving towards a more sustainable future.

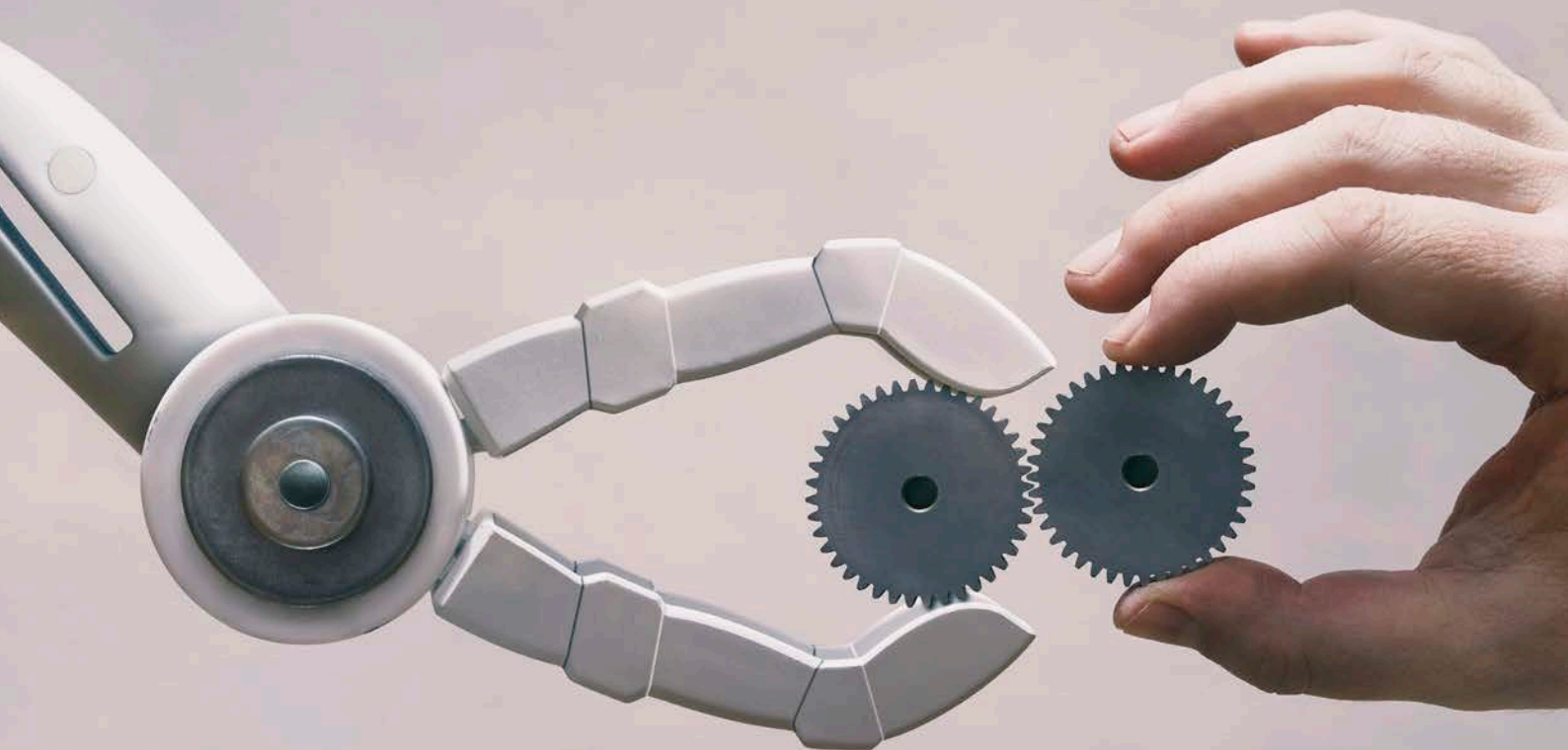
**Carola van Lamoen**  
Head of Sustainable Investing

# AI, will you judge me?

## SOCIAL IMPACT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

DANIËLLE ESSINK – *Engagement specialist*

The potential benefits of artificial intelligence (AI) come with risks that are not yet fully explored, let alone understood. As AI increasingly becomes a more important part of our daily lives, there is an urgent need for robust governance of AI systems. As we close our Social Impact of AI engagement theme, we reflect on some of the key trends, opportunities and challenges around this technology.



AI represents new opportunities for companies to grow and transform their businesses. According to the 2022 McKinsey Technology Trends Outlook, AI adoption across different industries continues to grow, and benefits such as cost reduction and improved efficiency remain significant. However, to achieve the full potential of AI, companies need to manage the associated risks that come with the development and use of the technology, including human rights-related risks. From 2019 to 2022, Robeco engaged with 10 companies from across the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector with the aim of promoting best practices in the development and responsible use of AI.

### Opportunities and challenges

Given the speed at which AI is being developed, there is no doubt that in the next few decades, this technology will transform our economy and society in ways we cannot imagine. According to the 2022 Worldwide Artificial Intelligence Software Forecast by the International Data Corporation (IDC), the worldwide AI market is estimated to show compound annual growth of 18.6% from 2022 to 2026 alone.

This type of growth represents massive opportunities for AI to contribute to positive changes, such as detecting patterns in environmental data, or improving the analysis of health information. Using AI to overcome some of the most difficult challenges that humans face, including climate change, is an exciting prospect. At the same time, AI could cause new problems or aggravate existing ones if companies do not have enough understanding of the risks associated with these technologies. For example, using AI algorithms for profiling can have discriminatory effects, such as credit rating algorithms disfavoring people from certain ethnic backgrounds, or those living in certain areas.

Similarly, AI can be used for surveillance – in public spaces but also in the workplace – putting the right to privacy at risk. This shows a growing need for the responsible governance of AI systems to ensure that such systems conform to ethical values, norms, and the growing number of AI regulations.

### Upcoming regulation

In response to the ethical and societal challenges raised by AI, an increasing number of regulatory initiatives and policy proposals have been launched by various players, including governments and governmental bodies such as national ethics committees, inter-governmental organizations such as the EU, non-profit organizations and academics.

On April 2021, the European Commission issued the AI Act as

## ‘ETHICAL PRINCIPLES ON THEIR OWN DO NOT ENSURE THE RESPONSIBLE DEVELOPMENT AND DEPLOYMENT OF AI.’

DANIËLLE ESSINK

a means of regulating the technology. This is a crucial step as it represents a sign of norm diffusion. In the proposal, clear requirements and obligations regarding the specific uses of AI are laid out for developers, deployers and users. The proposal takes a risk-based regulatory approach by distinguishing four categories based on the level of risk. For example, AI systems that have been identified as high-risk, such as CV-scanning tools that rank job applicants, will be subject to strict obligations including enhanced risk management processes and human oversight. AI systems with limited risks will remain largely unregulated.

Following the proposal in April 2021, the regulation was expected to come into effect in late 2022 or early 2023, using a transitional period. This growing legislative pressure around AI could pose serious regulatory risks for companies that are not well prepared to conform with the rising obligations.

### The results of our engagement

In September 2022, we concluded our Social Impact of AI engagement program and successfully closed 40% of the engagement cases. Through our engagement, we learned that companies are gradually aligning internal practices to principles of responsible AI. Many companies formalized AI principles that address topics like inclusiveness, fairness and transparency. Additionally, companies are increasingly pursuing a collaborative approach by actively participating and contributing to cross-industry multi-stakeholder initiatives that aim to advance responsible governance and best practices in AI. These types of initiatives play a decisive role in guaranteeing trustworthy AI across the industry.

However, ethical principles on their own do not ensure the responsible development and deployment of AI. Businesses require robust governance mechanisms to effectively implement their principles. In our engagement, we observed that transparency

around AI governance and implementation remained low, as most companies' public disclosures lacked clarity about how such principles translate into practice, and which checks and balances are in place. After talking to the companies, we learned about the specifics of the implementation, which then gave us the confidence to close some of the objectives successfully. The engagement results of this theme are, therefore, highly correlated with the company's willingness to set up constructive dialogues.

### Next steps

The alignment of AI technologies with ethical values and principles will be critical to promote and protect human rights in society. Even though much work has been done in this area, the implementation of AI principles and management of AI risks remains a critical area for improvement. As a result, we will continue our engagement work with a selection of companies in the ICT sector under our 'Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) engagement' theme. These dialogues have a strong focus on human rights and societal impact, and highlight topics like misinformation, content moderation and stakeholder collaboration. We will focus on how companies can contribute to SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions) by safeguarding human rights in the development and use of AI and promoting social, economic and political inclusion. ■

### CASE STUDY

#### **MICROSOFT**

**Microsoft is an American multinational technology company, showing strong performance in developing and implementing AI policies and guidelines. For example, the company has published six ethical principles to drive responsible AI as well as user tools, guidelines, and resources to help implement it throughout the lifecycle of technologies, from concept to deployment. One specific example is a checklist which helps prioritize fairness when developing AI. Additionally, Microsoft has added requirements on responsible use by clients in the terms of service and marketing materials of its AI products and services.**



# PLAYING FOR IMPACT

## SOCIAL IMPACT OF GAMING

ALEXANDRA MORTIMER – *Engagement specialist*

**In response to mounting concerns around the effects of ever-more popular games on the well-being of adults and children, in Q1 2021 we started engaging the global video gaming industry on their social impact. We selected six of the largest listed gaming companies located in the US, South Korea and China, with objectives that address the social impacts felt both behind and in front of the screen. Two years into the engagement, the industry has made significant steps, though not all at once.**



### In front of the screen

For the consumers playing video games, companies are expected to develop strategies that prevent harassment occurring between players, especially within Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), where large numbers of players interact at once. Automatic chat text filtering has emerged as a standard technology deployed by most companies under engagement. More sophisticated tiered responses have emerged among a subset of the companies, which feature artificial intelligence, feedback loops to the affected players, and appeals processes.

Overall, the application of such tools is decided by studios on a game-by-game basis, though we have encouraged companies to look for opportunities for studios to learn from each other, and create a more general application of harassment-prevention tools. Another interesting response by the industry has been to conduct research on the factors behind disruptive player behavior, though we have yet to see how this research is being leveraged in game design, which we will encourage in the coming months.

Other elements of player behavior that warrant attention are the money and time spent within games. Much of companies' focus has been on children's spending in recognition of their limited ability to regulate their behavior. A straightforward measure implemented by at least half of the companies has been to ban spending abilities for accounts below an early-teen age group, though age restrictions and time restraints are largely implemented through the consoles on which the games are played, and must be actively set by parents.

In September 2021, the Chinese government introduced limits on children's gaming time for which functions such as account verification had to be integrated. This had a significant effect on the

total time and money spent by young players, as already evidenced by one company. This area of impact has the potential to generate some creative design solutions, and we remain keen to see how the breadth of tools develops over the next year.

Two other player-end impacts have seen less traction in the intervening time. Depictions of violence within games are acknowledged as material by the companies most exposed to this content. However, we have yet to see examples of clear policies that guide what imagery is appropriate outside of regulation, and it is widely seen to be a creative rather than a risk-aligned decision. Similarly, in-game diversity has begun to garner attention in US-based studios, but lacks traction in other markets. Companies have highlighted extended character appearance options that allow for diverse avatars, and characters in storylines that reflect one or more dimensions of diversity such as race, gender expression or physical ability levels. This, too, is considered a creative decision that is determined by project teams, for which the diversity levels of the teams themselves is considered a large factor. In some instances, feedback structures have been put in place for employees to flag inappropriate or concerning content, though it doesn't appear that this is a formal process that is taken advantage of across all projects.

### Behind the screen

Since the launch of the engagement, the issue of diversity and inclusion on the work floor has only continued to rise in prominence within the gaming sector. Allegations of toxic workplace cultures, enabling sexual harassment and discrimination, continued into 2021, triggering legal and employee action. The response by the industry has been twofold. Western companies have appointed leads for diversity, installing training and development programs, while remaining defensive of the view that allegations are the result of systemic issues. Companies in other regions however approach diversity primarily from the gender perspective, and are less responsive to the issue overall. Wider workplace conditions have attracted more uniform attention, with companies reporting initiatives to improve work-life balance.

Where companies have developed across the board is in their reporting. All companies under engagement now publish annual ESG reports, when at the beginning of the engagement, three had yet to do so. The reports highlight initiatives that relate to many of our objectives, and largely conform to frameworks that include metrics that we deem important for transparency, in particular those that are related to the workforce. We've provided input to companies on topics we deem material to receive more transparency about, and the metrics we'd like to see in future, acknowledging that many are still exploring this new form of communication.

**'CREATING RECOGNITION OF UMBRELLA COMPANIES' RESPONSIBILITIES TOWARDS SUBSIDIARIES' RISKS REQUIRES A SHIFT IN MINDSET AT THE MANAGEMENT LEVEL.'**

ALEXANDRA MORTIMER

## Focus areas for the last year of engagement: responsibility and regulation

Decisions around in-game elements such as character diversity are largely seen to be within the remit of the creative and project teams, as they're highly relevant to the user experience. Umbrella companies are nonetheless still responsible for managing subsidiaries' risks, including those faced by consumers when using their product. Creating recognition of this dynamic is at the center of this engagement, and requires a shift in mindset at the management level.

China's restrictions around minors' gaming time is but one example of how regulations are influencing the way that users interact with games. Markets are separately mandating how monetization and violence should be included in games, creating a fragmented landscape of acceptable game features. Prominently, 'loot boxes', which have been likened to gambling products, have come under scrutiny by regulators in the UK and US, in addition to four countries where the products are already actively regulated or banned. How companies are navigating this landscape, especially within international expansion plans, is an element we will look to explore further as we approach the end of the engagement theme. ■

## CASE STUDY

### ACTIVISION BLIZZARD

Activision Blizzard, an American video game holding company, faced prominent allegations of employee misconduct towards the end of 2021, generating wide media coverage and employee outrage. Since then, the company has settled an investigation with a state regulator and implemented a multi-pronged initiative of diversity personnel, targets, and strengthened employee protection policies. We have discussed this at length with the company as part of our engagement, and provided detailed feedback on how Activision can improve its reporting to progress the resolution of the issue by increasing confidence in the efficacy of its new measures. If the efforts are proven to have worked, the company's response to its scandal may serve as a positive example to peers in a sector that has faced many similar allegations in past years.

### NC SOFT

South Korean video game developer and publisher NC Soft has made significant steps in improving its sustainability disclosures since the beginning of our engagement in 2020, moving from elementary ESG disclosure to publishing an inaugural ESG report in 2021. The company's new ESG reports have particularly highlighted NC Soft's approach to diversity, both within the company and in-game. Though not regarded as highly material in its domestic base compared to Western markets, NC Soft has shared how its employee code of ethics accounts for diversity and inclusion. It has also published human capital metrics describing how gender is represented across different levels of the company. NC Soft has also outlined the process in place to intercept content that may be inappropriate in different markets, both in imagery and in text.

# A MULTI-FACETED APPROACH

## BIODIVERSITY

CLAIRE AHLBORN – *Engagement specialist*

**Nature is critical to meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees. Countries, companies and civil society organizations must work together to eliminate and reverse biodiversity loss and secure our and our planet's health and well-being. In an active effort to live up to our and our clients' environmental and social responsibilities, Robeco has set up an integrated and multi-layered engagement approach to address biodiversity loss.**



In prioritizing economic development, humanity has caused considerable damage to the natural world and its ecosystems. Yet, a degraded biosphere will have a direct impact on growth and human welfare over the next several decades. From 1970 to 2018 there has been a reported 69% average decline in global wildlife species. In Latin America, this number rises to a staggering 94%.

Moreover, studies conducted in the Netherlands, Brazil and France found financial institutions to have hundreds of billions of assets highly dependent on the services provided by healthy ecosystems, from pollination to clean water provision. Such estimates help frame the gravity of biodiversity loss trends and underline the collective urgency to halt and reverse them.

**A multi-layered engagement strategy**

Addressing biodiversity loss requires urgent action from both governments and companies. With their wide coverage, investors are often in a unique position to push for change. Yet, investor action on biodiversity has been limited, with data barriers and capacity limitations keeping them from integrating biodiversity into their investments, engagement and voting decisions at scale.

As the financial materiality of biodiversity and the impact that companies and financial institutions have on nature is becoming clearer, Robeco has set out to create a holistic, multi-layered and scalable engagement approach towards biodiversity. As such, we are not only engaging the various relevant stakeholders, from

governments and companies to data providers, but also exploring how stewardship efforts can be scaled through proxy voting and collaborative engagements.

**Engagement: From impact assessments to incentive structures**

Biodiversity loss is one of the defining challenges of the 21st century. Robeco’s engagement initially started off with a focus on addressing biodiversity loss linked to deforestation among companies exposed to high-risk commodities. We have since extended the engagement program in both time and scope to accommodate engagements on other drivers of biodiversity loss, from pollution to overfishing.

Through the engagements, we expect companies to assess their biodiversity impacts and dependencies and set a biodiversity strategy that includes, for instance, no-deforestation targets. We also expect them to report key impact indicators following recognized reporting frameworks such as the Taskforce for Nature-Related Financial Disclosures.

To achieve environmental goals, biodiversity must be embedded within companies’ governance and incentive structures. Companies must actively engage their stakeholders, assuring adequate efforts are made to not exclude smallholder farmers and local communities from their supply chains.

The theme will among others cover companies engaged as part of our new RobecoSAM Biodiversity Equities Fund, which directs financial flows towards biodiversity solutions providers. We aim to engage with those companies where we see opportunities to enhance their contributions to biodiversity, including wider asks such as the systematic integration of biodiversity into companies’ strategies and risk management processes, or topic-specific discussions on, for instance, sustainable livestock manure management.

**Voting for nature**

To scale up our efforts, Robeco has introduced a new voting approach around deforestation, targeting companies that have high exposure to deforestation risk, but do not have adequate policies and processes in place to reduce their impact, or are involved in severe and repeated deforestation-linked controversies. Drawing on the insights from benchmarks such as Global Canopy’s Forest500 ranking, we start by focusing on companies involved in the key forest risk sectors: palm oil, soy, beef and leather, timber, pulp and paper.

**‘ADDRESSING BIODIVERSITY LOSS REQUIRES URGENT ACTION FROM BOTH GOVERNMENTS AND COMPANIES. WITH THEIR WIDE COVERAGE, INVESTORS ARE OFTEN IN A UNIQUE POSITION TO PUSH FOR CHANGE’**

CLAIRE AHLBORN

### Speaking up together

Seeking a wider reach, we are increasingly looking for collaborative engagement opportunities. We recently signed the Business for Nature statement calling for mandatory corporate reporting for nature by 2030. We also joined the letter campaign and ESG data provider engagement by the Finance Sector Deforestation Action, a group of over 30 investors calling for increased action and transparency on protecting our forests.

Furthermore, Robeco was honored to be part of the core investor group that launched the Nature Action 100 initiative during the UN Biodiversity Conference in Montreal in December. This aims to harness the power of collaborative engagement to address nature loss and biodiversity decline, focusing on the 100 companies with the largest impacts and dependencies on nature.

The initiative will be co-led by the sustainability advocacy group Ceres, the Institutional Investors Group on Climate Change (IIGCC), the Finance for Biodiversity Foundation and the financial think tank Planet Tracker. There will be three main work streams:

- the Secretariat, responsible for setting up the initiative’s Steering Group and supporting administrative, communications and fundraising activities;
- the Technical Advisory Group, tasked with identifying priority engagements and developing science-based investor guidance and tools; and
- the Corporate Engagement group, focusing on developing a multi-year plan to engage companies deemed most important to stemming nature and biodiversity loss.

Global investors are invited to sign up to the program and lead on individual dialogues on behalf of the global investor community.

### Public policy dialogue

Shifting to the sovereign level, Robeco continues to be actively involved in the Investor Policy Dialogue on Deforestation (IPDD) initiative since it was formally set up in July 2020, co-chairing the work streams responsible for engaging with the governments of Brazil and Indonesia. Currently, the coalition is comprised by 65 institutional investors from 19 countries, with USD 10 trillion in assets under management. As a long-term investor in these countries’ bonds and equities, Robeco considers sovereign engagement as a necessary and powerful step to encourage governments that are significantly exposed to deforestation risk to implement relevant policies and contribute to a positive change.

### CASE STUDY

**The Finance Sector Deforestation Action**  
 We are actively partaking in the Finance Sector Deforestation Action (FSDA) initiative, a collaborative investor group constituting of over 30 investors that have signed the COP26 Financial Sector Commitment on Eliminating Agricultural Commodity-Driven Deforestation throughout investment and financing activities by 2025.

As part of the investor group, we have joined a letter and engagement campaign launched at the end of 2022, jointly aiming to engage more than 50 companies. These include, among others, meat producer Marfrig and forestry company Suzano, on creating clear no-deforestation and traceability targets, due diligence processes and disclosures.

In October 2022, Robeco took part in the IPDD’s group trip to Jakarta and met with representatives from national government agencies to discuss various ESG topics. In particular, the IPDD group met with the Indonesia Stock Exchange (IDX) and with the Chamber of Commerce (KADIN), signing two Memorandums of Understanding to promote country sustainability disclosures for listed companies, and to support the Regenerative Forest Business Sub Hub, respectively. ■

# ENGAGING TO CLOSE THE ASIA DISCOUNT

## CORPORATE GOVERNANCE STANDARDS IN ASIA

RONNIE LIM – *Engagement specialist*

**Our engagement to improve corporate governance standards began in 2017 with Japan and was widened in 2020 to include Asia. In addition to engaging with companies, we also work with other investors and stakeholders to create a positive environment for change. We focus on the most material governance issues to be addressed, with target companies selected in close collaboration with our fundamental equity teams.**



## Opportunities and challenges

We have two broad streams of engagement in Asia. Firstly, we work with regulators and policy stakeholders such as financial regulators and local stock exchanges in Japan, South Korea, and to a lesser extent in China, to ensure an improved and level playing field for ESG issues. Secondly, we work constructively with companies in Japan and South Korea to improve their disclosure, communication and financial performance. We have also worked in collaboration with other asset managers to improve the Asian corporate governance 'ecosystem', with active participation in the two working groups (Japan and South Korea) within the Asian Corporate Governance Association (ACGA) and the International Corporate Governance Association (ICGN).

Our policy engagement included a virtual delegation meeting with Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. One of the issues we raised was the disclosure timing of annual reports, and we noted that it is of utmost importance to investors that these be released prior to the annual general meetings. In addition, we were co-signatories of a letter to Japan's Financial Services Agency and the Tokyo Stock Exchange on two pathways to address the low rate of female participation: changes to the listing rules and via Japan's Corporate Governance Code.

We engage with domestic investors in Japan who are increasingly motivated to understand how economic value is created by efficient balance sheet management. Over the past year, we delivered a series of ICGN webinars on the topic of capital efficiency and long-term value creation which saw active participation by listed

companies. The content of the webinars was how cashflow and return on capital create long-term shareholder value, and the impact of valuation by efficient management of balance sheet items, such as by lowering inventory and increasing dividend payouts.

The markets of Japan and South Korea, where the engagement is focused, have large valuation discounts compared to other developed markets in Europe and the US. These discounts have widened in the year to date with the strong relative appreciation of the US dollar. The main valuation metrics we use include price-earnings ratios (PEs), price-to-book value and EV/EBITA.

The companies under engagement were also trading at valuation discounts compared to their global industry peers, which we attribute partly to broad governance issues in Japan and South Korea, but also to the lack of robust financial strategies and inefficient balance sheets. Our dialogue was consistently explaining the importance of both effective investor communication, together with the setting of appropriate capital management targets.

## Company engagements

We have written in previous reports that the essentials of good corporate governance go beyond using 'check-list' assessments of governance codes and are closely related to the two principles of transparency and accountability. Therefore, we ask companies to improve transparency by publishing narrative reporting on their corporate strategy and having a distinct financial strategy. KPMG's last survey in 2020 showed that Japan leads the world, with 579 companies issuing integrated reports. There is much to celebrate given the increased emphasis on reporting on material environmental and social (E&S) issues, including setting targets on greenhouse gas emissions reductions. We have commended companies when they have not only reported on material E&S issues, but have also set credible near-and long-term targets. However, there are still significant opportunities for companies to improve reporting of their financial strategy and to give robust explanations on specific targets that would support their business strategy.

We consider a robust financial strategy to have several components, including disclosing the thresholds for planned capital expenditure, investment and acquisitions. We constantly remind executives of the basics of corporate finance, including having positive returns on capital, and we push for increased accountability by providing practical recommendations such as publishing dividend policies and setting appropriate incentives. We also challenge companies to dispose of any crossholdings and low-return business assets, and to return excess capital in the way of dividends, share buybacks and the cancellation of any treasury shares.

**'WE ATTRIBUTE THE  
PREDILECTION FOR MANAGEMENT  
TO PERSIST WITH EXCESS CASH  
OR INEFFICIENT BALANCE SHEETS  
TO EITHER EXCESSIVE RISK  
AVERSION OR THE PRESERVATION  
OF 'OPTION VALUE''**

RONNIE LIM



The engagements usually begin with a dialogue questioning some aspects of how the board is structured, and how compensation and incentives are structured. Typically, a company will be trading at a low valuation because of investor skepticism about the sustainability of key operating metrics such as an unusually high profit margin, or a persistently low dividend pay-out ratio. Most companies defend these practices by steering the dialogue to their need to create earnings growth, or through specious arguments for the need to retain legacy business divisions which are no longer profitable.

We attribute the predilection for management to persist with excess cash or inefficient balance sheets to either excessive risk aversion or the preservation of 'option value' – for example to make a large acquisition without shareholder scrutiny or approval. These are behavioral and cultural issues that we believe are some of the main contributors to the 'Asia discount' and can be very challenging for a minority investor to address. We do not believe that there is a single, magic bullet to fix this problem, but we have found some success in making the business and investment case for our proposals and demonstrating sincerity by being constructive and patient.

#### CASE STUDY

##### **Omron Corporation**

**We began engagement in 2016 with Japanese electronics maker Omron, which now trades at a significant premium relative to industry peers. The company's integrated reporting steadily improved and its communication with investors now includes published interviews with its CEO and CFO. In addition, Omron's revised remuneration incentives for corporate value enhancement include a 60% weighting for financial metrics. We had regular meetings with the company to discuss capital management performance on both an absolute and relative basis and we worked with Omron to improve its return on equity for each business unit. We closed our engagement as having been successful.**

# Proxy Voting

DIANA TRIF – *Engagement specialist*

MANUEL SOBRAL – *Active ownership analyst*

**Engagement specialist Diana Trif and Active Ownership Analyst Manuel Sobral reflect on some of 2022's key trends, from the growing shareholder activism in Australia to the critical topic of Anti-ESG shareholder proposals, the actors behind them and how to spot these misleading agenda items.**



## Anti-ESG shareholder proposals

Investors and issuers were faced with a transformed US AGM landscape in 2022. The growing national debate around sustainable investing prompted a dramatic increase in the number of shareholder proposals filed by conservative activists seeking to halt companies' ESG efforts and to combat "woke capitalism". These proposals, now widely referred to as "anti-ESG", entail new challenges for investors seeking to push US companies to step up their ESG efforts.

On the one hand, there are concerns that anti-ESG proponents may seek to take advantage of certain features of the US proxy machinery to block pro-ESG shareholder proposals from reaching ballots. The tactics that may be employed to achieve this are diverse, yet have a common denominator – they concern shareholder proposal excludability under US rules. A shareholder proposal becomes eligible for a vote if it reaches a company's proxy statement, but companies can exclude the proposal if it fails to meet certain procedural and substantive requirements.

Particularly relevant in this sense is that the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) allows companies to leave out substantially duplicative shareholder proposals from its proxy statement, as well as to exclude a shareholder proposal which addresses the same subject matter as a proposal that received low levels of support in any previous meeting. The 2022 proxy season has shown that anti-ESG shareholder proposals often take advantage of these provisions by duplicating the wording of pro-ESG shareholder proposals, which can lead to a number of consequences. First, if the anti-ESG shareholder proposal is submitted first, it will be the one that makes it to the ballot. Second, if an anti-ESG shareholder proposal receives less than 5% support at a meeting, as often is the case, pro-ESG proposals covering the same topic can be excluded from the proxy materials for the next three years.

In addition, anti-ESG shareholder proposals are often verbatim copies of pro-ESG shareholder proposals; they tackle the same topics ranging from lobbying to racial equity, and often appear to be fueled by a desire to advance rather than hinder a company's ESG goals. Discerning the true objective of the proposal in many cases requires an in-depth analysis that spans well beyond the proxy materials made available by companies. This analysis covers aspects such as the proponent, the views expressed by the proponent, and any public statements made by the proponent regarding the shareholder proposal in question, thereby placing a burden on proxy analyses. Robeco assesses each shareholder proposal on a case-by-case basis and supports resolutions which aim to increase transparency on material ESG issues, enhance long-term shareholder value creation, address material ESG risks and enforce appropriate conduct.

## Corporate Governance in Australia

In recent years, climate activism has become increasingly prominent in Australia, with shareholder associations such as the Australasian Centre for Corporate Responsibility (ACCR) and Market Forces strongly advocating for sustainability goals through engagement and the submission of shareholder proposals. This is in line with the wider global trend of growing scrutiny of companies over sustainability concerns by investors and regulators alike. For the Australian market however, Rio Tinto's detonation of the Juukan Gorge cave in 2020 pushed sustainability concerns further into the forefront of the corporate agenda, and throughout the 2022 proxy season we continued to observe its effects on shareholder activism.

ACCR is a shareholder advocacy organization which focuses on the management of ESG-related issues. Throughout 2022, the organization filed a total of 13 shareholder proposals, of which eight were related to climate concerns. Climate proposals included requests for a climate sensitivity analysis at BHP Billiton's and Origin Energy's annual general meetings, and requests to stop advocating for the development of new and expanded coal mines at Rio Tinto, Woodside Energy and Santos.

In addition, Market Forces has actively targeted Australian banks connected with fossil fuel financing. The shareholder activist group submitted proposals to the upcoming AGMs of National Australia Bank, ANZ Bank and Westpac, requesting that the banks report on how they plan to stop financing fossil fuel projects. Earlier in Q4, Market Forces also submitted a similar proposal at Commonwealth Bank's October AGM, which received less than 10% support.

Despite their continued efforts in pushing for corporate climate action, shareholder activists such as ACCR and Market Forces have struggled to gather significant support and pass climate proposals at AGMs. The Australian regulatory environment presents a significant obstacle for passing shareholder resolutions related to climate, as shareholders are not allowed to propose an advisory resolution unless it is permitted under the company's constitution. Consequently, it is often the case that ACCR's and Market Force's climate proposals are not put up for vote at AGMs.

This issue gained significant attention in the past, as part of the 2015 court case of Australasian Centre for Corporate Responsibility versus Commonwealth Bank of Australia. The case came to light due to the omission by the Commonwealth Bank of two ordinary proposals filed by ACCR. In the end, Commonwealth Bank won the case, which harmed the prospect of activism through advisory shareholder resolutions. However, shareholders will often submit a resolution to amend the constitution along with the advisory resolution they would like to pass. Robeco is supportive of proposals that facilitate the submission of shareholder resolutions, as we deem these to be an important means of engagement between companies and shareholders. ■

# COMPANIES UNDER ENGAGEMENT IN 2022



## Environment

### Biodiversity

Barry Callebaut AG  
Compagnie Generale des Etablissements  
Michelin SCA  
JBS SA  
Marfrig Foods SA  
Mondelez International  
Ryohin Keikaku Co Ltd  
Sappi Ltd.  
Suzano Papel e Celulose SA  
The Hershey Corporation  
Top Glove Corp. Bhd.  
Unilever

### Climate Transition of Financial Institutions

Bank of America Corp.  
Barclays Plc  
BNP Paribas SA  
Citigroup, Inc.  
DBS Group Holdings  
HSBC  
ING Groep NV  
JPMorgan Chase & Co., Inc.  
Sumitomo Mitsui Financial Group, Inc.

### Lifecycle Management of Mining

Anglo American  
AngloGold Ashanti Ltd.  
Barrick Gold Corp.  
BHP Billiton  
First Quantum Minerals Ltd.

Fortescue Metals Group Ltd.  
Gerdau SA  
Polymetal International Plc  
Polyus Gold OAO  
Sibanye Stillwater Ltd.

### Natural Resource Management

Ambev SA  
Callon Petroleum Co.  
CF Industries Holdings, Inc.  
Continental Resources, Inc.  
Diageo  
OCI NV  
PepsiCo, Inc.  
Sappi Ltd.  
Sewern Trent PLC  
Tronox Holdings Plc

### Net Zero Carbon Emissions

Anglo American  
ArcelorMittal  
Berkshire Hathaway  
BHP Billiton  
BlueScope Steel Ltd.  
BP  
CEZ as  
Chevron  
China National Building Material Co. Ltd.  
CRH Plc  
Ecopetrol SA  
Enel  
ExxonMobil  
Gazprom OAO  
HeidelbergCement AG

Hyundai Motor  
JFE Holdings, Inc.  
LyondellBasell Industries NV  
Marathon Petroleum Corp.  
Petroleo Brasileiro  
Phillips 66  
PTT Exploration & Production  
Rio Tinto  
Royal Dutch Shell  
Saudi Arabian Oil Co.  
Valero Energy Corp.  
Vistra Energy Corp.  
WEC Energy Group Inc

### Single Use Plastics

LyondellBasell Industries NV  
PepsiCo, Inc.  
Procter & Gamble Co.  
Sealed Air Corp.

### Sound Environmental Management

Guangdong Investment Ltd.  
Origin Energy Ltd.  
Saudi Arabian Oil Co.

## Social

### Digital Innovation in Healthcare

Abbott Laboratories  
AbbVie, Inc.  
CVS Caremark Corp.  
Elevance Health Inc  
Eli Lilly & Co.

Fresenius SE  
HCA Holdings, Inc.  
Philips  
Roche  
Sinopharm Group Co., Ltd.  
UnitedHealth Group

### Diversity and Inclusion

Eli Lilly & Co.  
Netflix Inc  
Oracle Corp  
Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. Ltd.  
Thermo Fisher Scientific, Inc.

### Human Rights Due Diligence for Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas

Bharat Electronics Ltd.  
Booking Holdings, Inc.  
Cemex SAB de CV  
Fast Retailing  
HeidelbergCement AG  
Inditex  
PTT Exploration & Production  
Sinotruk Hong Kong Ltd.  
SolarEdge Technologies, Inc.  
Wacker Chemie AG

### Labor Practices in a Post Covid-19 World

Accor SA  
Amazon.com, Inc.  
Delivery Hero AG  
InterContinental Hotels Group Plc  
Marriott International, Inc.  
Meituan Dianping  
Uber Technologies, Inc.  
Wal-Mart Stores

### Social Impact of Artificial Intelligence

Booking Holdings, Inc.  
Microsoft  
Visa, Inc.

### Social Impact of Gaming

Activision Blizzard, Inc.  
NCsoft Corp.  
NetEase.com, Inc.

Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc.  
Tencent Holdings Ltd.

### Sound Social Management

Aon Plc  
Bayerische Motoren Werke  
Glencore Plc  
MTN Group  
Post Holdings Inc  
Procter & Gamble Co.  
Tesco Plc  
Thermo Fisher Scientific, Inc.

### Governance

#### Corporate Governance in Emerging Markets

Companhia de Concessoes Rodoviaras SA  
CPFL Energia SA  
Haier Smart Home Co., Ltd.  
Hyundai Motor  
Midea Group Co. Ltd.  
Samsung Electronics  
Woongjin Coway Co. Ltd.  
XinAo Gas Holdings Ltd.

#### Corporate Governance Standards in Asia

Hynix Semiconductor, Inc.  
Mando Corp.  
Mitsubishi Motors  
OMRON Corp.  
ROHM Co. Ltd.  
Shin-Etsu Chemical Co. Ltd.

#### Good Governance

Arcadis NV  
DSM  
Heineken Holding  
Nissan Motor  
Royal Dutch Shell  
Samsung Electronics  
Signify NV  
Sumitomo Mitsui Financial Group, Inc.  
Unilever

#### Responsible Executive Remuneration

Booking Holdings, Inc.

Deutsche Boerse  
Henkel AG & Co. KGaA  
Linde Plc  
NIKE  
Schneider Electric SA  
Tesco Plc  
Walt Disney  
Wolters Kluwer

### SDGs

#### SDG Engagement

Adobe Systems, Inc.  
Alphabet, Inc.  
Amazon.com, Inc.  
Amgen  
Apple  
Aptiv PLC  
Banco BTG Pactual S.A.  
Boston Scientific Corp.  
Capital One Financial Corp.  
CB Richard Ellis Group, Inc.  
Charter Communications, Inc.  
Companhia de Concessoes Rodoviaras SA  
Deutsche Boerse  
eBay  
Elanco Animal Health, Inc.  
Electronic Arts, Inc.  
Elevance Health Inc  
F5 Networks, Inc.  
Jeronimo Martins  
JPMorgan Chase & Co., Inc.  
L'Oréal  
Meta Platforms Inc  
Mr. Price Group Ltd.  
NASDAQ OMX Group, Inc.  
Neste Oil Oyj  
Novartis  
OTP Bank Nyrt  
Rio Tinto  
Salesforce.com, Inc.  
SalMar ASA  
Samsung Electronics  
Sandvik AB  
Sony  
STMicroelectronics NV  
Total  
Union Pacific  
United Parcel Service, Inc.

Volvo Group  
Zoetis, Inc.

## Global Controversy Engagement

### Acceleration to Paris

Anhui Conch Cement Co. Ltd.  
Caterpillar, Inc.  
China Petroleum & Chemical  
Formosa Plastics Corp.  
ITOCHU Corp.  
Lukoil Holdings OAO  
Marubeni Corp.  
Mitsubishi  
Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corp.  
PetroChina  
POSCO  
Rosneft NK OAO  
Sumitomo Corp.

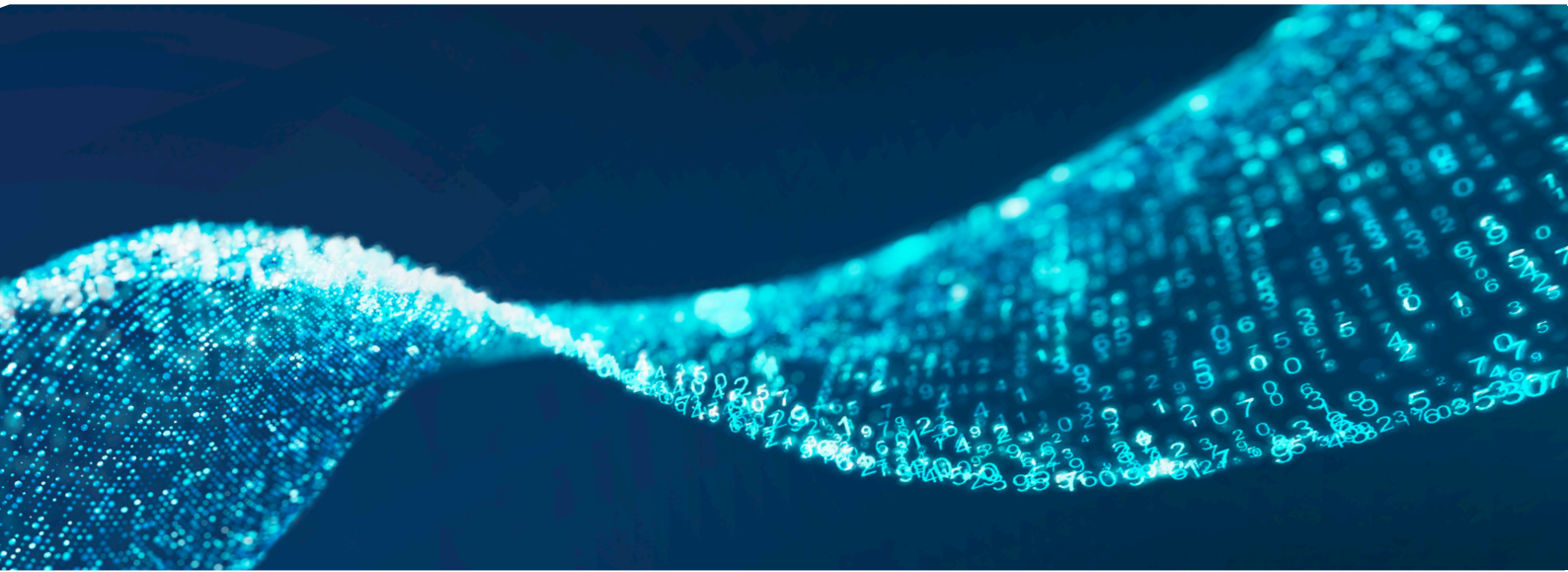
### Palm Oil

MP Evans Group PLC  
REA Holdings PLC  
Wilmar International

## Global Controversy Engagement

Currently, 10 companies are under engagement based on potential breaches of the UN Global Compact and/or the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises.

# CODES OF CONDUCTS



## Robeco's Engagement Policy

Robeco actively uses its ownership rights to engage with companies on behalf of our clients in a constructive manner. We believe improvements in sustainable corporate behavior can result in an improved risk return profile of our investments. Robeco engages with companies worldwide, in both our equity and credit portfolios. Robeco carries out three different types of corporate engagement with the companies in which we invest; value engagement, Sustainable Development Engagement and enhanced engagement. In all three types of engagement, Robeco aims to improve a company's behavior on environmental, social and/or corporate governance (ESG) related issues with the aim of improving the long-term performance of the company and ultimately the quality of investments for our clients.

Robeco adopts a holistic approach to integrating sustainability. We view sustainability as a long-term driver of change in markets, countries and companies which impacts future performance. Based on this belief, sustainability is considered as one of the value drivers in our investment process, like

the way we look at other drivers such as company financials or market momentum.

More information is available at: [https://www.robeco.com/en-int/sustainable-investing/influence\\_](https://www.robeco.com/en-int/sustainable-investing/influence_)

## The UN Global Compact

One of the principal codes of conduct in Robeco's engagement process is the United Nations Global Compact. The UN Global Compact supports companies and other social players worldwide in stimulating corporate social responsibility. The Global Compact became effective in 2000 and is the most endorsed code of conduct in this field. The Global Compact requires companies to embrace, support and adopt several core values within their own sphere of influence in the field of human rights, labor standards, the environment and anti-corruption measures. Ten universal principles have been identified to deal with the challenges of globalization.

### Human rights

1. Companies should support and respect the protection of human rights as established at an international level
2. They should ensure that they are not

complicit in human-rights abuses.

### Labor standards

3. Companies should uphold the freedom of association and recognize the right to collective bargaining
4. Companies should abolish all forms of compulsory labor
5. Companies should abolish child labor
6. Companies should eliminate discrimination in employment.

### Environment

7. Companies should adopt a prudent approach to environmental challenges
8. Companies should undertake initiatives to promote greater environmental responsibility
9. Companies should encourage the development and diffusion of environmentally friendly technologies.

### Anti-corruption

10. Companies should work against all forms of corruption, including extortion and bribery.

More information can be found at: <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/>

# CODES OF CONDUCTS

## OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises

The OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises are recommendations addressed by governments to multinational enterprises operating in or from adhering countries, and are another important framework used in Robeco's engagement process. They provide non-binding principles and standards for responsible business conduct in a global context consistent with applicable laws and internationally recognized standards.

The Guidelines' recommendations express the shared values of the governments of countries from which a large share of international direct investment originates and which are home to many of the largest multinational enterprises. The Guidelines aim to promote positive contributions by enterprises to economic, environmental and social progress worldwide.

More information can be found at: <http://mneguidelines.oecd.org/>

## International codes of conduct

Robeco has chosen to use broadly accepted external codes of conduct in order to assess the ESG responsibilities of the entities in which we invest. Robeco adheres to several independent and broadly accepted codes of conduct, statements and best practices and is a signatory to several of these codes. Next to the UN Global Compact, the most important codes, principles, and best practices for engagement followed by Robeco are:

- International Corporate Governance Network (ICGN) statement on
- Global Governance Principles
- United Nations Global Compact
- United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
- United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights

- OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises
- Responsible Business Conduct for Institutional Investors (OECD)

In addition to our own adherence to these codes, we also expect companies to follow these codes, principles, and best practices. In addition to our own adherence to these codes, we also expect companies to follow these codes, principles, and best practices.

## Robeco's Voting Policy

Robeco encourages good governance and sustainable corporate practices, which contribute to long-term shareholder value creation. Proxy voting is part of Robeco's Active Ownership approach. Robeco has adopted written procedures reasonably designed to ensure that we vote proxies in the best interest of our clients. The Robeco policy on corporate governance relies on the internationally accepted set of principles of the International Corporate Governance Network (ICGN). By making active use of our voting rights, Robeco can, on behalf of our clients, encourage the companies concerned to increase the quality of the management of these companies and to improve their sustainability profile. We expect this to be beneficial in the long term for the development of shareholder value.

## Collaboration

Where necessary, Robeco coordinates its engagement activities with other investors. Examples of this includes Eumedion; a platform for institutional investors in the field of corporate governance and the Carbon Disclosure Project, a partnership in the field of transparency on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from companies, and the ICCR. Another important initiative to which Robeco is a signatory is the United Nations Principles for Responsible Investment. Within this context, institutional investors commit themselves to promoting responsible investment, both internally and externally.

## Robeco's Active Ownership Team

Robeco's voting and engagement activities are carried out by a dedicated Active Ownership Team. This team was established as a centralized competence center in 2005. The team is based in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and Hong Kong. As Robeco operates across markets on a global basis, the team is multi-national and multi-lingual. This diversity provides an understanding of the financial, legal and cultural environment in which the companies we engage with operate. The Active Ownership team is part of Robeco's Sustainable Investing Center of Expertise headed by Carola van Lamoen. The SI Center of Expertise combines our knowledge and experience on sustainability within the investment domain and drives SI leadership by delivering SI expertise and insights to our clients, our investment teams, the company and the broader market. Furthermore, the Active Ownership team gains input from investment professionals based in local offices of the Robeco around the world. Together with our global client base we are able leverage this network to achieve the maximum possible impact from our Active Ownership activities. ■



Robeco Institutional Asset Management B.V. (Robeco) is a pure play international asset manager founded in 1929. It currently has offices in 15 countries worldwide and is headquartered in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Through its integration of fundamental, sustainability and quantitative research, Robeco is able to offer institutional and private investors a selection of active investment strategies, covering a range of asset classes.

Sustainability investing is integral to Robeco's overall strategy. We are convinced that integrating environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors results in better-informed investment decisions. Further we believe that our engagement with investee companies on financially material sustainability issues will have a positive impact on our investment results and on society.

More information can be found at:  
<https://www.robeco.com>

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