

Since 2012 a coalition of Swedish civil society organisations has campaigned for better sustainability rules for Swedish state pension funds, aiming to ensure that the institutions invest in a socially and environmentally responsible way.

CASE STUDY

Schyssta Pensioner – the Swedish campaign for fair pensions

Background

Since their establishment in 2000, the Swedish state pension funds – the AP funds – have had the mandate to take social and environmental issues into account in their investment decisions and are considered [leaders in the area of Responsible Investment](#). So the discovery of human rights violations and environmental degradation caused at the Marlin Mine in Guatemala by Goldcorp, an investee company of the AP funds, unsurprisingly caught the attention of some Swedish civil society organisations working in Guatemala in 2008. When in 2011 Swedwatch and Latinamerikagrupperna (Solidarity Sweden-Latin America) exposed more instances of investments held by AP funds in [harmful mining projects in Latin America](#), the Swedish public became increasingly aware of the impact that the AP funds have in communities all across the world.

Interest in this topic among Swedish civil society groups grew organically over the years. So when in 2012 the government began a review of the structure and governance of the AP funds and called for proposals from Swedish institutions, it represented an opportunity to influence the investment strategies of the funds. Soon afterwards, the campaign “[Schyssta Pensioner](#)” (“fair pensions”) was born. The aim of the campaign is simple: to ensure that the AP funds invest in a socially and environmentally responsible way. It is run by a strong network of eleven non-governmental organisations: [Africa Groups of Sweden](#) (Afrikagrupperna), [Emmaus Stockholm](#), [Fair Action](#), [FIAN Sweden](#), [Forum Syd](#), [Fossil Free Sweden](#), [Jordens Vänner](#) (Friends of the Earth Sweden), [Klimataktion](#) (Climate Action), Kristna Fredsrörelsen (the [Swedish Fellowship of Reconciliation](#)), [Latinamerikagrupperna](#) and [WWF Sweden](#).



#schyssta pensioner

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Campaigning approach

First of all the campaign uncovered and publicised where the AP funds were invested, highlighting issues and risks linked to fossil fuels, mining, abuse of international regulations, land grabbing, palm oil and the arms trade. Each member of the network has its own focus and mission, and highlights problems associated with the funds' investments that are relevant to their own work. Through their different campaigning angles, the reporting, mobilisation and lobby work of the campaign are 'crowdsourced' by the different NGOs.

Because the focus of Schyssta Pensioner is on state pension funds, its decision to make this a public facing campaign was straightforward. The Swedish parliament is the body responsible for directing the AP funds' investment policies and practices. The campaign coalition decided to start a petition, initially in the form of a postcard campaign and later online, directed at those MPs that are part of the parliamentary Pension Group that has been leading the review of the funds. With the evidence at hand that many Swedes care about how their state pension is invested, the Schyssta Pensioner campaigners were well placed to lobby the parliament directly.

The AP Funds

The AP funds (AP-fonden) were set up as buffer funds by the Swedish state in 2000 to maintain pensions value levels over the long-term, even "[during periods affected by peaks in the number of retirees, or by an economic downturn.](#)"

Their assets are significant: in 2014 they held more than [€165bn in assets under management](#). As state pension funds the AP funds are regulated by the Swedish parliament, meaning that, contrary to the UK for example, campaigning on how the funds invest must be targeted at the government, not the funds themselves.

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I want my future pension to be secured by real sustainable investment undertaken by the AP funds and not by investments in companies that cause human rights violations and environmental degradation.

Schyssta Pensioner petition,
signed by more than 6,000
Swedish citizens

Outcome & next steps

The campaign achieved some great engagement levels: more than 6,000 people signed the campaign and, just as importantly, it really sparked intense debate among the Swedish public and in the media. The coalition managed to secure more than 100 opinion pieces in national and regional newspapers, raising awareness and leading to much greater public scrutiny of the funds. By using testimonies of those who witnessed the human rights violations and environmental destruction linked to AP funds' investee companies, the campaign has further attracted media coverage and a series of meetings with key decision-makers.

In June 2015 the Swedish government published its proposals for reforming the AP funds. The campaigners behind Schyssta Pensioner were pleased to see that many of their demands had been incorporated into the proposals, for example that investments should contribute to sustainable development. Although the proposal wasn't perfect in Schyssta Pensioner's view – for example, the maximisation of revenue was still set above all other principles – Responsible Investment criteria were integrated into many parts of the proposals, demonstrating the campaign's positive impact.

The proposal did however face significant criticism from trade unions, the Confederation of Swedish Industry and the AP funds themselves who voiced concerns about proposed changes to the governance and structure of the funds - proposals unrelated to the Schyssta Pensioner campaign asks. This led to some parties, which had initially supported the proposal, withdrawing their support. Given that the parliamentary Pension Group has a consensus-based approach to decision-making, Per Bolund, the country's financial markets minister, [put the proposals on ice in December 2015](#).

It is currently unknown whether and when the reform of the AP funds will be continued, so the Schyssta Pensioner campaign is far from over. The Schyssta Pensioner Group recently published a [detailed article](#) in the industry press, highlighting that regardless of what happens with the structure of the funds, they still need to consider sustainability on a much more consistent and rigid basis. Next steps involve pushing the parliament and government to move forward on the parts of the proposals concerning sustainability, and seek other allies to support this. The public strategy will focus on highlighting critical cases where the AP funds are involved, reminding the Swedish public of the continued urgency of applying stricter rules to the AP funds' investments.

Campaign demands

1. The Parliamentary directives to the AP funds ought to clarify that investment should take place with respect for human rights and the environment and be in line with the objective of staying below 2°C of global warming.
2. The AP funds should be given the mandate to actively invest in the transition to a sustainable and climate neutral society through long-term investments such as renewable and sustainable energy, railway, public transport, and energy efficiency of buildings.
3. A new and independent sustainability council should be created and be equipped with sufficient resources to undertake its work adequately. If the AP funds lack the resources to undertake active engagement with those investee companies that contribute to human rights violations and environmental damage, the AP funds should divest from these companies.

To their credit, the AP funds are engaged in Responsible Investment campaigns globally, and have taken some positive steps with regard to improving their Responsible Investment policies and practices. For example they have signalled they will make “[sustainability integral to the asset management process](#)” and have [agreed to coordinate the way they report on the carbon footprint](#) of the individual funds to boost transparency. Whilst recognising this progress, the campaign will continue to push for a really rigorous sustainability approach to be applied to all of the AP funds’ investments.

Learnings

What has made the Schyssta Pensioner campaign so powerful is its strong collaboration between different civil society organisations, each of which has its own agenda. Yet the involved organisations have continuously managed to find common ground and agree on joint proposals. One of the factors that has made this possible is the recognition among network participants that they don’t need to agree on every single point, as long as they agree on the core issues and can come up with joint suggestions. Shared ownership was another important factor for keeping the momentum going. All of this has really helped maintain the campaign over a long time – an important fact, given that there are no short cuts to achieving change at large pension funds.

To find out more

The campaign website of Schyssta Pensioner (in Swedish) can be accessed [here](#).

Explore Swedwatch and Solidarity Sweden – Latin America’s report on Swedish Pension funds’ investments in Latin American mines [here](#). A more recent report by Swedwatch on the lack of transparency AP2’s investment in agricultural land in Brazil can be found [here](#). The most recent report on AP2 and land grabbing accusations is raised in [this report](#) by Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos, GRAIN, Inter Pares, and Solidarity Sweden – Latin America.

WWF Sweden’s mapping of the AP funds’ fossil investments (in Swedish) can be accessed [here](#). A related fact sheet – in English – on “The Carbon Bubble and the Swedish Pension Funds” can be read [here](#).

To enable further exchange and skill sharing in campaigns like this one by the Schyssta Pensioner network, ShareAction is developing a European Network for civil society organisations. To find out more, don’t hesitate to get in touch with ShareAction’s European Outreach Officer, Friederike Hanisch, on friederike.hanisch@shareaction.org.

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