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(Re)Searching the Middle Class in Nairobi: Insights from an Interdisciplinary Workshop

Dr. Yonatan N. Gez, Dr. Johannes M. Waldmueller, Dr. Anthony Boanada-Fuchs

Since the early 1990s, most African countries have been seeing encouraging signs of democratization and economic improvement, leading some analysts to rejoice in Africa's so-called "second independence." Such optimism is indebted in no small part to the alleged emergence and consolidation of a substantial African middle class. According to figures issued by the African Development Bank, about 355 million Africans (34% of the general population) qualified as middle class in 2010, representing a substantial rise from 27% only ten years earlier.¹ The bank further predicted that this figure will reach 1.1 billion Africans (42% of the general population) by 2060.²

Such growth attracts much interest from national and international stakeholders. Governments turn to the middle class as a critical target for winning elections, financial organizations and businesses identify it with potential clients and a new range of consumer demands, and international donors largely perceive it as a key actor in the move towards greater democracy and political participation. While these stakeholders are largely united by a positive spirit regarding the alleged rise of the African middle class, the academic literature has been pointing at some of the complexities associated therewith.³ For example, scholars suggest that, from a sustainability angle, the growth of the middle class leads to overexploitation of natural resources and increased energy consumption, which in turn can bear

¹ "The Middle of the Pyramid: Dynamics of the Middle Class in Africa", Tunis: African Development Bank Group, 2011. By middle class, the bank counted all households with earnings of between 2 USD and 20 USD per day (floating class included).

² "Africa in 50 Years' Time: The Road towards Inclusive Growth", Tunis: African Development Bank Group, 2011.

³ See Dominique Darbon and Comi Toulabor, *Quelle(s) classe(s) moyenne(s) en Afrique ? Une revue de littérature*, (Paris: Agence Française de Développement, 2011); Dominique Darbon and Comi Toulabor, *L'invention des classes moyennes africaines*, (Paris: Karthala, 2014); Nic Cheeseman, Does the African middle class defend democracy? Evidence from Kenya, *Afrobarometer Working Papers*, 2014; Hervé Maupeu, "Classe moyenne kenyane et démocratie électorale: Mode de vie et revendication politique," *Afrique Contemporaine* 244 (2012):53-68.

negative impacts on stability and social justice in the medium and long term.⁴ Indeed, cautious voices have warned against overreliance on development-related statistics in Africa.⁵ But even if taken at face value, statistics such as offered by the African Development Bank reveal that, in fact, the majority of the so-called African middle class is actually made out of a 'floating class,' a highly vulnerable economic group constantly at risk of sliding into poverty.⁶ And just as the very qualification of the floating class as middle class has been debated, the topic also raises other fundamental questions, such as with regard to the very relevance of employing such a foreign terminology, which took shape within a very specific (Western) context and historical period. A key question in this regard is whether, for Africans themselves, class represents a central locus of identity, and if so, where does it stand vis-à-vis other significant loci such as ethnicity.⁷ An interesting attempt to engage with such multifaceted identity research has been underway at the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies, where Dieter Neubert and Florian Stoll apply the notion of "milieus" to offer a nuanced classification and analysis of Kenyan social groups at the intersection between economic class and attitudes towards modernity.⁸

It is within this context of lively discussions that the authors decided to organize a workshop on the topic of the middle class in Nairobi.⁹ The choice of Kenya has been informed, among other things, by the 2008 African Development Bank calculation whereby 44.9% of the country's general population qualified as middle class, a figure that is among the highest anywhere in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰ The workshop aimed at breaking away with preconceptions by approaching the topic from an interdisciplinary angle wherein, rather than being a mere question of income levels, the middle class is recognized for carrying substantial social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental implications, many of which are yet to be seen.

The workshop, held between 28 September and 3 October 2015, brought together a broad spectrum of lectures and discussions around the topic of the emerging and consolidating middle class in Nairobi and beyond. It hosted, most notably, collaborators from the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies, and featured leading Kenyanists among its speakers. The participants themselves—19 overall—were selected from multiple disciplinary backgrounds, and mainly included young Kenyan urban professionals who qualify themselves as middle class. The workshop combined three days of lectures, in which we explored the meaning of class in global, regional, national and local-urban contexts, and two days of field research, conducted in six small groups in different parts of the city. Each of the six groups pursued its own theme according to their interests, building on the discussions that

⁴ Breena Holland, "Ecology and the Limits of Justice: Establishing Capability Ceilings in Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 9.3 (2008):401-425.

⁵ Morten Jerven, *Poor Numbers: How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do About It*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

⁶ "The Middle of the Pyramid: Dynamics of the Middle Class in Africa", Tunis: African Development Bank Group, 2011.

⁷ Rachel Spronk, "Exploring the Middle Classes in Nairobi: From Modes of Production to Modes of Sophistication," *African Studies Review* 57.1 (2014): 93-114.

⁸ Dieter Neubert and Florian Stoll, "Socio-Cultural Diversity of the African Middle Class: The Case of Urban Kenya", *Academy Reflects: Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies*, 2015.

⁹ The workshop was funded by the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI), and was organized by Kompreno (kompreno.org) in collaboration with the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva and the French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA) in Nairobi. We take this opportunity to thank our collaborators for their contribution.

¹⁰ "The Middle of the Pyramid: Dynamics of the Middle Class in Africa", Tunis: African Development Bank Group, 2011.

preceded over the first phase of the workshop. The very themes of the field projects deserve being mentioned, as they offer an interesting perspective on the internal diversity of the notion of middle class as reflected through the perspectives of the workshop participants themselves. These themes included:

- Social policy and political participation
- Housing and real estate
- Consumption habits, shopping and advertisements
- Lifestyles, values, mindsets and culture
- Entrepreneurship, investment and class mobility
- Infrastructure and environmental concerns

Following the fieldwork phase, the sixth and final day of the workshop was dedicated to group presentations to a panel of experts. The presentations reflected participants' keenness and involvement in the workshop's themes, bearing witness to the relevance of class terminology and struggles for socioeconomic ascension to their personal lives. Indeed, the participants' first-hand experiences allowed them to concretize ideas about class and creatively associate them with tangible attainments and preoccupation, both personal and public. At times, the middle class was presented in such inclusive terms, and membership therein seemed so desired, that one could not help but muse over the inflationary tendency for middle class self-identification.¹¹

Over the course of the workshop, the two-sided exchange between speakers and participants allowed many topics to be addressed. Importantly, and going well beyond economic accounts, our participants pointed at the issue of class performance, drawing distinction between those that "really are" middle class and those that "fake it until they make it." Lectures and discussions also emphasized the close link between class and kinship, including urban-rural ties and ethnic affinity. When it came to class values and behavioral norms, it has been suggested that these can be observed most clearly with regard to politics, as in the question of fostering democracy through middle class growth and political elections. In addition, middle class growth seemed to play out differently concerning ecological considerations and satisfaction of needs. During our discussions, it emerged that the middle class can be broken down into various sub-forms, and it has been argued that the lower middle classes and the upper middle classes seem to be drifting apart evermore, hence undermining the very notion of some middle class cohesion.

In short, in Nairobi, middle class does not imply homogeneity. Our workshop's group projects mapped out – in a literal, qualitative sense¹² – the broad variety and internal differences of the city's middle classes and perspectives thereon. They highlighted the need for further research, be it on middle class lifestyles, media and publicity, the visual representation of class in Kenya, changing consumption

¹¹ Mosa Phadi and Claire Ceruti. "Multiple meanings of the middle class in Soweto, South Africa," *African Sociological Review* 15.1 (2011).

¹² An important methodological feature has been the option to use GPS devices for gathering information during the field exercise. This made the geo-localization of other media (interviews, pictures, notes, etc.) possible, allowing them to be translated onto a map generating a "thick description" of Nairobi's middle class spatial arrangements.

patterns and the economic sustainability of spending and saving, or the ecological and planning-related considerations in an urban environment of fast-changing socioeconomic demographics. Housing and land markets also appear to be crucial lens for further research, as is the exploration of links between strengthened civic attitudes, political participation and middle class consolidation. Lastly, our participants' fieldwork input offers a good illustration of the need to break down broad questions of political development into local levels of analysis, such as neighborhood and community organization. To translate this approach into effective policies, more transdisciplinary and trans-institutional collaboration (between the academic, private, governmental and public sectors) is certainly required and, as our workshop demonstrated, feasible.

Dr. Yonatan N. Gez is an anthropologist whose research focuses mainly on religion and development in Africa. He is a member of the Martin Buber Society of Fellows in the Humanities and Social Sciences at the Hebrew University, where he also teaches at the Glocal Community Development Studies Master's program.

Dr. Johannes M. Waldmueller is a legal anthropologist, broadly focusing on human and nature rights in the context of food sovereignty in the Andes. He is currently preparing a book manuscript on data and governance at the New York University while acting as Kompreno's vice-president in the fields of inequality, "rurban" development and sustainability.

Dr. Anthony Boanada-Fuchs is a trained architect and urban analyst who uses institutional analyses to deepen the understanding of the political economy of housing policies and urban informality in India, Brazil, and South Africa. He is co-founder of Kompreno and currently a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Sao Paulo.