What is the middle class?

Who is part of the Middle Class?

Where do the Middle Class Live?

Why does the middle class matter? What does the middle class want? How to measure the middle class.
The international research platform Kompreno organizes an interactive research seminar revolving around Nairobi’s middle class. The event will be held from September 28 to October 3, 2015 at the French Institute of Research in Africa (IFRA) in Kileleshwa Nairobi. Employing a multidisciplinary approach, we will stimulate exchange between various stakeholders with the aim of developing a comprehensive understanding of the middle class in contemporary urban Kenya. Scholars and students from Kenya and abroad, local politicians and policy makers, as well as artists, journalists and the interested public are all encouraged to participate.

The interactive research seminar consists of two interrelated pillars:

### Lectures and Roundtables

Lectures and Roundtables - Middle Class and Class Mobility in Nairobi: During lectures and roundtables, Kenyan and foreign experts from various disciplinary backgrounds will provide stimulating input aimed at unpacking the complexities of the notion of the middle class. While focusing primarily on Nairobi, we will also be touching on comparable or related case studies, on the national, continental, and international levels. These interdisciplinary sessions are intended as a platform for mutual exchange of ideas, and as such, questions and input from the audience will be encouraged.

### Fieldwork-Based Projects

Fieldwork-Based Projects - The Spatial Practices of a Fluid Middle Class: participants have the opportunity to carry out minor research projects in one of several neighborhoods of Nairobi, as determined by the participants themselves in agreement with the organizers. The students will have three full days to carry out their field work investigation in the city and additional time to process their data and prepare their presentations. Knowledge stakeholders and event organizers will give feedback on the research projects on two occasions (mid-term and final presentation). The results of this empirical fieldwork will be presented to a panel of experts, and the very best presentations will be considered for publication.

According to the African Development Bank, in 2010, about 355 million Africans (34% of the general population) qualified as middle class, a substantial rise from 27% only ten years earlier (ADB, 2011a:20; ADB, 2011b). The bank further predicts that this figure is expected to rise to up to 1.1 billion Africans (42% of the general population) by 2060.

The Central Business District of Nairobi as the symbol of economic growth and aspirations.

Picture Source: www.dw.de/germanyeyes-booming-kenyan-market/a-16262974
Special attention will be paid to spatial mapping techniques and qualitative research methods, with the aim of exploring the spatial orientation of the middle class within the urban fabric. Local interviews, sites of interest, and images will be geo-referenced, and research results will be added up to a base city map that functions as reference framework for remapping Nairobi’s middle class. Thus, beyond expanding their horizons on Nairobi’s middle class, the workshop participants will also have the opportunity to develop important scholarly techniques, acquiring organizational, academic and methodological skills (such as GPS tracking) in a small, self-guided research project.

In order to translate collected data into spatial positions, geo-taggers will be distributed to participants by the event organizers.

Real Estate developers are catering to the growing demand of Nairobi’s upper and middle classes - currently constructing one of the biggest shopping malls in Sub-Saharan Africa - Tworivers.
Nairobi is bustling with life and is regarded as a city that never sleeps; the middle class and their increased demand for services is a primary engine for economic activity centers, places of consumption, and cultural production. 

Image Source: www.africanleadership.co.uk/nairobi-is-ranked-africas-most-expensive-city/
The notion of “middle class” is highly elusive for both academics and policy makers. The limited, mainly economistic, conceptualization of middle class allows a high level of association (e.g. self-identification), while enabling a flexible research approach for academic and political actors. For decision makers, class is predominantly defined using international quantitative standards derived from aggregate survey data and involving debatable socio-economic categories (cf. Jerven 2013). Beyond the question of the accuracy of such data as well as its modes of analysis, quantitative indicators tend to concentrate on economic capacities to the exclusion of other context-specific cultural and personal parameters, such as consumption preferences, social obligations, visual representations and religious convictions. Similar questions arise when we seek to understand other social classes and the dynamics of interclass mobility. In this regard, we should recognize that the notion of the middle class is no less about individual self-imagination and group identification than it is about ‘objective’ economic categories. Thus, we agree with the growing scholarly trend which seeks to complement quantitative data with qualitative approaches as a way of updating class-based categories.

What is the Middle Class?

What Is the Idea Behind (Re)searching the Middle Class?

Workshop participants will be provided with the opportunity to carry out their own research projects in small groups. Starting from the initial project idea as submitted to the selection committee (see below), the research project will take shape within the first two days of the workshop. Lectures and feedback moments will be used to fine-tune the projects and eventually to combine compatible individual research endeavors, based on feasibility and relevance. Applicants are encouraged to consider the following themes. However, other themes related to the middle class may also be considered:

• The eco-social costs and dependencies brought about by the growing middle class
• Socio-economic ascension and changing consumption habits and saving strategies
• Middle class and religion; confluences between socioeconomic mobility and religious mobility
• The (self-)portrayal of the middle class through various art forms and through urban youth culture
The workshop is open to Kenyan and international students and the interested public with demonstrated interest in the general theme. Prospective participants should send a motivation letter (up to 500 words), as well as their Curriculum Vitae, to: nairobi@kompreno.org, by 15 August 2015.

The letter should clearly outline the applicant’s interest in the workshop, as well as any relevant experience with regard to Kenya’s middle class. Applicants who already have a specific research question in mind may mention it in the letter. The letter/CV should contain the applicant’s contact details and professional/academic affiliation. A small number of bursaries are available, covering transportation costs to the workshop and back for participants within Kenya. Those requiring reimbursement should clearly specify that in their application. Final decisions will be communicated by 30 August 2015. Participants who attend the entire workshop will be granted a certificate.

Invited speakers will have an opportunity to discuss their ideas with other experts, and may explore further collaborations through an upcoming publication and involvement in a potential follow-up research project.

The workshop organizers also encourage participation by academics and professionals (e.g. politicians and policy makers, artists, and journalists), who are interested in being invited to speak to the workshop participants. Prospective speakers should send an abstract of their proposed lecture, as well as a short biography (one paragraph), to: nairobi@kompreno.org, by 15 August, 2015.

Invited speakers will have an opportunity to discuss their ideas with other experts, and may explore further collaborations through an upcoming publication and involvement in a potential follow-up research project.


About the Organizers

This research and lecture event is organized by Kompreno, an international research collective based in Geneva. It is hosted at the French Institute of Research in Africa (IFRA), and receives financial support from the Swiss State Secretariat of Education, Research and Innovation (SERI). The interdisciplinary project team consists of Prof. Yvan Droz (The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva), Dr. Anthony Boanada-Fuchs (University of Sao Paulo), Dr. Yonatan N. Gez (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem/The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva) and Dr. Johannes M. Waldmueller (New York University/ Universidad Andina Simón Bolivar, Quito).

For more information and newsletter subscription, visit: www.kompreno.org/nairobi
A research and lecture event taking place from 28 September to 3 October 2015

Where do the Middle Class Live?

to measure the middle class?

What does the middle class want?