



LOST IN TRANSFORMATION?

South Africa's emerging African middle class

Lawrence Schlemmer

Prof Lawrence Schlemmer reports on a new empirical study for CDE of South Africa's rapidly growing African middle class, mainly aimed at establishing its orientation towards business and economic growth. It is the first major study of how this class views key challenges facing the country. Schlemmer finds that it is much smaller than is popularly believed, but is growing very rapidly. It strongly identifies with the ANC government, but is not uncritical of it; has few points of contact with the established white middle class; is generally not active in civil society; and has ambiguous attitudes to private enterprise. While it regards affirmative action and BEE as vital to its interests, it doubts whether these policies will do anything for the majority of black people. In this and other ways, this class differs significantly from the much smaller black empowerment elite. This publication is a summary of the main report, which is obtainable from CDE.

One of the most visible signs of South Africa's democratic revolution has been the spread of affluence to certain categories of African people whose effective participation in markets and the formal economy were curtailed and distorted by apartheid laws. Two factors have fuelled this widening economic participation: the 'silent revolutions' of opportunity that capitalist growth and the expansion of markets bring with them, and legislated advancement through policies of affirmative action and black economic empowerment.

Analysts may disagree on the relative contributions of markets and social engineering, but all agree that there is a growing African middle class, and almost all that this is a positive development.

This is scarcely surprising, since there is a wealth of international social science literature that associates middle classes with a range of positive attributes. These typically include economic growth, social and political stability, and support for civil society in pluralist democracies. This study of the emerging African middle class in South Africa has been motivated by the belief that a middle class independent of the state and supportive of private enterprise is indeed a vital ingredient of sustained economic growth and political pluralism. Societies in which independent middle

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classes are prominent tend to display high levels of innovation; emphasise choice, reward for effort, talent, and creativity; encourage risk-taking and respect for entrepreneurship; and display high levels of individual confidence.

Many hope that a growing African middle class will take South African society in these directions. However, this view is not unanimous. There is left-wing and Africanist hostility to middle class values and behaviour, stemming from associations with acquisitive individualism and inequality.

The African middle class: size and shape

Whether the African middle class is treated as something to cultivate or curtail, there is no consensus on its size and shape. Most analysts have focused on the entire range of middle class categories, which includes low-paid white-collar workers such as clerks, supervisory and sales personnel, as well as all schoolteachers and nurses, including nursing assistants. This inclusiveness allowed the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) to calculate in 2004 that the African middle class comprises about 2,5 million people. Other academic studies based on survey evidence have arrived at estimates varying from 1,6 million to 3,6 million people.

However, this kind of inclusive definition, which regards non-manual, white-collar occupations as automatically middle class, is a rather blunt instrument. Sociologists worldwide have long recognised that if the idea of social class is to mean anything at all, complex subdivisions are needed. In South Africa there is pressure, for nation-building purposes, to be optimistic about the redistribution of wealth and opportunity, and to talk up the country's recent economic progress. This encourages the blurring of distinctions in order to include as many African people as possible in the middle class.

This study proceeds from the assumption that such definitions and estimates, whether accurate or not in their own terms, are too inclusive to be useful for identifying a class that has the social influence and self-confidence typically associated with middle classes elsewhere. Hence the exploding army of routine white-collar occupations, making up a 'lower' middle class, has been excluded. The African middle class discussed in this analysis and defined hereafter as the 'core' middle class is therefore much smaller than the generous demarcation typically used by the media and some previous academic studies.

However, the relatively great prominence of public sector employment in South Africa makes it impossible to circumscribe an African middle class that is substantially independent of the state, this being a feature of older and well-established middle classes in developed countries. This analysis, while aimed at occupational, income, and living standard levels equivalent to those of the established white middle class, cannot avoid the inclusion in this class of many people who are directly involved with the state.

This dependence notwithstanding, it may be assumed that the core middle class has at least a significant measure of the self-confidence, material security, and social influence associated with middle classes the world over.

Applying the definition

Although class categories have become increasingly complex and blurred in the post-modern information age, sociologists have typically subdivided classes along the following lines:

In South Africa there is pressure, for nation-building purposes, to be optimistic about the redistribution of wealth and opportunity

1. **The upper class:** major owners of capital; the most exclusive elites, often those with substantial inherited wealth; a top order of highly esteemed politicians; and the heads of important or respected institutions.
2. **The upper middle class:** senior executives of large businesses; highly ranked professionals (judges, bishops, surgeons, and others who tend to earn very high fees rather than salaries); and very senior administrators in the public and semi-public sectors.
3. **The 'middle-middle' class:** most middle-level executives; owners of medium-sized businesses or small businesses that are capital-, technology-, or knowledge-intensive; most salaried professionals; and the middle-management levels of the public and semi-public sectors.
4. **The lower middle class:** small business people; clerical and sales workers at responsible levels; modestly paid salaried professionals such as school teachers and nurses; technicians and skilled non-manual service personnel.
5. **The working class:** manual employees at both skilled and semi-skilled levels.
6. **The lower working class:** elementary and other very low-skilled workers.
7. **The underclass:** the chronically unemployed, and those involved in ad hoc or informal sector survival activities.

This study enumerates and analyses an African middle class consisting of people who fall into categories 2–3, referred to hereafter as the core African middle class.

One potential source of data, the South African Census, does not lend itself to being subdivided in this way, and can only give an approximate aggregate of categories one to four. What the 2001 census tells us is that slightly less than a third (32,4 per cent) of working Africans in 2001 were broadly lower middle class and above; figures for other population groups were 38 per cent for coloured people, nearly 70 per cent for Indians, and 76 per cent for whites. In terms of occupational status gains, Indians have made the most rapid progress since 1996 (up from 53,6 per cent), followed by Africans (up from 25,7 per cent) and coloured people (up from 31,7 per cent). Whites have made the smallest gains, but the occupational levels of whites are so high in relative terms that further gains have necessarily become limited.

To compensate for the imprecision of the census, this study used the results of the very large (25 000 in number) All Media Products Survey (AMPS) of the South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF). Because the AMPS surveys are conducted twice a year, and are used to estimate important aspects of media exposure and consumer behaviour, they have established considerable credibility. The main AMPS survey used is the one released in late 2003.

Three measures were explored as a basis of delineating the core African middle class as described earlier. These were: educational level; an occupational measure; and a combined index of income and standard of living, the latter specifically aimed at distinguishing the middle middle and upper middle classes from the lower middle class. The evidence suggests that the Living Standards Measure (LSM)¹ employed in the AMPS surveys plus an income filter is the best way of doing so. Thus defined and measured, the core African middle class in South Africa today has the following size and shape:

Small, but growing rapidly

In terms of living standards and income combined, the reducing but still existing racial inequalities in South Africa are very clearly exposed; table 1 sets out the racial composition of the total middle middle and upper middle class in late 2003.

Three measures were explored as a basis of delineating the core African middle class

Table 1: The racial composition of the South African middle middle and upper middle classes, late 2003

| | Estimated numbers, 16 years or older | Percentage shares |
|-----------|--------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Africans | 135 107 | 8,6 |
| Coloureds | 87 895 | 5,6 |
| Indians | 74 495 | 4,8 |
| Whites | 1 269 633 | 81,0 |
| TOTAL | 1 567 130 | 100,0 |

Source: AMPS 2003b, based on LSM 9 and 10, with a household income filter of R12 000 a month or higher.

The table shows that despite rapid recent improvements in occupational status, in late 2003 the core African middle class was still tiny compared to the established white middle class. This was also true of the Indian and coloured middle classes.

So, while some previous studies have estimated the size of the African middle class as 3,3 per cent of all African adults in 1994, rising to 7,8 per cent in 2000, this study estimates the core African middle class at less than 1 per cent of the entire African adult population of about 22,4 million in 2003.

But how quickly is it growing? Data extracted from the 1993 AMPS survey, weighted to allow a comparison with 2003, yielded the comparison over time presented in table 2.

Table 2: Comparison of the numbers and proportions of Africans in the LSM-8 category (original weights) in 1993 and 2003

| | 1993 | 2003 |
|--|------------|------------|
| Estimated African adult population, 16+ | 17 270 000 | 22 324 000 |
| Estimated numbers in LSM-8, 1993 weights | 19 000 | 129 000 |
| Proportion of all African adults in LSM-8 | 0,11% | 0,58% |
| Annual rate of growth of African LSM-8 population, 1993–2003 | | 21,1% |
| Annual rate of growth of entire African adult population | | 2,6% |

Note: Until 2001, LSM-8 was the highest LSM category; in that year the categories were reordered and extended to 10. Source: AMPS surveys, 1993 and 2003.

It shows that the number of Africans in the top LSM category has grown by a phenomenal 21 per cent a year over the decade to 2003, more than eight times faster than the adult population as a whole. If this rate of growth were to continue (an unlikely prospect, as argued below), and if it is applied to the estimated 135 000 Africans in the core middle class in 2003, by 2013 there will be 916 000 Africans in the core middle class and higher. This would be more than 70 per cent of the current numbers of middle-class whites, and substantially more than either white English-speakers or Afrikaans-speakers in the middle class today.

The most recent growth is even more rapid – indeed, explosive. According to the latest available AMPS survey (2004b), the estimated 135 000 Africans in LSM 9 and 10 with the income filter in 2003 has grown to roughly 185 000 in the 12 months to late 2004, amounting to a growth rate of 37 per cent over the year. This growth rate, or even that achieved between 1993 and 2003, cannot possibly be sustained, however, due to skills and edu-

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cational constraints as well as the fact that the transformation of the public and private sectors will slow down as targets are achieved.

The future rate of growth of the African middle class is impossible to estimate without exhaustive research into educational output and the absorptive capacity of the higher end of the labour market. Suffice it to say, however, that even if growth slows down to a more sustainable rate of about 10 per cent to 12 per cent a year, in a decade the core African middle class will have a demographic 'presence' almost equal to that of the current English-speaking white core middle class, which is unlikely to grow very rapidly from now on. If the economy grows more rapidly, this 'presence' will emerge sooner. Therefore, within ten years the South African middle class will change significantly.

However, as we have seen, the core African middle class is still very small – 9 per cent of the South African core middle class in late 2003, and rising very rapidly but to a still rather small proportion of around 11 per cent in late 2004. This reality – and the sense of vulnerability and relative deprivation that it doubtlessly engenders – probably underlies the current pressures for the rapid racial transformation of the workforce, and black economic empowerment. Even at the present rate of growth, this pressure – applied through political and moral leverage – is unlikely to abate until well into the next decade.

A new survey: attitudes and expectations

For this project, a two-part survey was undertaken of the attitudes and orientations of the core African middle class – that is, the middle middle and upper middle classes as defined in table 1. The first part consisted of a set of questions added to the MarkData Omnibus, a nationwide, all-race, stratified probability survey. The size of this sample was 2 268 households, with one adult respondent selected randomly within each household. The added questions were aimed assessing how the core African middle class was positioned relative to the broader African middle class, and the African population in general.

The second part of the survey consisted of longer and more intensive interviews with a dedicated sample of 200 individuals, drawn by the author from an operational demarcation of the 'core middle class' incorporating the types of occupations normally regarded as upper middle class as well as middle class. The sample included many opinion leaders, and can therefore also be regarded as an African 'middle class opinion leader' group (see box, 'The interview sample', page 6). These interviews were also conducted by MarkData field workers.

This part of the study was largely aimed at establishing the orientation of the core African middle class towards economic growth in general, and private enterprise in particular. It also focused on aspects of the social dynamics of African middle class life relevant to governance and a competitive economy. It is the first major study of the new, closely defined, African middle class, and the first to analyse how it is positioned relative to the socioeconomic challenges facing the country.

The core African middle class is a very small class, many of whose members have benefited from rapid upward mobility

Key findings

Key points that emerged from the survey and the interviews included:

- The core African middle class is a very small class, many of whose members have benefited from rapid upward mobility. Most have made very substantial occupational leaps within a short period.
- It is growing fast, but has not yet become consolidated and secure in terms of assets,

The interview sample

For the purposes of this study, the core middle class was defined as follows:

- People with 'high' professional occupations, including secondary school principals, academics, and scientists (27 respondents)
- Senior executives of large companies and semi-state organisations (21 respondents)
- Owners of small and medium-sized formal businesses (18 respondents)
- Senior officials in the central, provincial, and local administrations (35 respondents)
- Elected public representatives at the central, provincial, and local levels (30 respondents)
- Senior trade union leaders (17 respondents)
- Senior journalists (11 respondents)
- Priests, ministers of religion, and pastors (10 respondents)
- Senior personnel of welfare agencies and NGOs (8 respondents)
- Civic leaders and leaders of residents' and ratepayers' organisations as well as school governing bodies (23 respondents)

The general profile of the interviewees was as follows

| | |
|--|---------|
| • Women: | 33% |
| • Men: | 67% |
| • Median net household income a month | R11 460 |
| • Median net personal income a month | R 8 330 |
| • Proportion with tertiary education: | 81% |
| • Proportion with grade 12 or higher: | 93% |
| • Access to a computer: | 83% |
| • Live in formerly white suburbs: | 52% |
| • Live in townships but mainly in middle class zones or in improved housing: | 48% |

In terms of education, the sample is at least on par with the white middle class. In terms of income, it is slightly above the average for all whites, and represents a mixture of middle middle class (about 67 per cent) and upper middle class (about 33 per cent) people. The average income levels of the middle class sample were the same as the all-race averages in LSM categories 9 and 10 in the AMPS surveys. However, the sample would not have anywhere near the accumulated assets of the white middle class.

Most respondents acknowledged the importance of business for economic growth, but many also supported the notion of a paternalistic and interventionist state

status, and self-image. Its members are very influential and are much wealthier than the national average, but they do not necessarily see themselves in these terms.

- The attitudes of respondents to business and private enterprise differed significantly, and were sometimes contradictory. Most respondents acknowledged the importance of business for economic growth, but many also supported the notion of a paternalistic and interventionist state. The policy of privatising state and semi-state institutions was overwhelmingly rejected.
- Respondents did not designate affirmative action and other race-based transformation policies as 'factors making for personal success and advancement' in an open-ended question. However, when such alternatives were specifically offered later in the questionnaire, they were chosen by 38 per cent. Forty per cent of respondents believed that stronger government policies for African advancement were needed.
- While many respondents strongly identified with the ruling party, and would not consider supporting any other political party, they were also often dissatisfied with the outcomes of government policies.

In addition, the research pointed to the following features and trends:

- **Status and self-image**

Almost as many respondents described themselves as working class (31 per cent) than as middle class (34 per cent) – and 5 per cent of them chose the category ‘the poor.’ This downward self-reflection of status is consistent with a society that espouses egalitarian and anti-elitist values (similar results have been recorded in surveys in the United States). It is also consistent with members of a class who, despite enjoying high salaries, have not acquired the material security of accumulated assets.

- **Rapid social mobility**

Only 41 per cent of previous positions held by respondents and 35 per cent of next-to-last positions were at comparable levels of responsibility to present ones. Twenty per cent of respondents had no previous jobs, having been political activists, unemployed, or students.

- **Values**

The interviews confirmed South Africa's status as a society in which religious values are seen as very important. As many as six out of ten of respondents could be described as very religious, not only in terms of belief but also of frequency of religious observance. They tended to explain the importance of religion to them in terms of personal self-development rather than in transcendental terms. In a choice of statements on the meaning of religion, more than half chose the statements ‘confidence in own ability’ and ‘self-discipline and hard work.’ Religious convictions, however, do not lead to ‘conventional’ (in western terms) moral views.

More than fifty per cent of the sample believed that having children out of wedlock was ‘normal’ and ‘natural.’ This was despite the fact that African communities are experiencing a number of deviations from normally parented families which seem to have highly detrimental effects, including teenage pregnancies; single-parent households, mainly females who shoulder the responsibility of bringing up children and trying to find work in a very difficult job market for women; husbands who are absent or perambulatory on a semi-permanent basis; and judging by the 2001 census, unusually high mortality rates among working age men and fathers.

Despite this, support for conventional notions of the importance of the two-parent family in the African middle class is only lukewarm.

- **Money**

One of the hopes vested in an expanding middle class is usually that it will tend to save relatively more money than others by exercising thrift and deferring gratification. Results from questions about savings and debt levels may be summarised as follows:

Most respondents at all income levels were living within their means, and savings levels were relatively high; however, some respondents were deeply in debt.

Members of the core African middle class were saving more than whites with similar incomes. The range of savings and investments in this group was more diversified and ‘sophisticated’ than those of whites in the broader MarkData survey. By contrast, rates of longer-term savings and insurance policy ownership in the bigger African lower middle class were far weaker than either those among whites or the African core middle class.

Most respondents at all income levels were living within their means, and savings levels were relatively high

These patterns are remarkable for a new middle class, and reveal sharp differences between the core African middle class and the African lower middle class, largely consisting of white-collar functionaries performing routine tasks.

Attitudes to business and development

A key intention of the study was to investigate the orientation of the African middle class to challenges of economic growth and development, and particularly the role of business and the market in achieving growth. Thus respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements about private business. The results are presented in table 3.

Table 3: View on the role of private business

| Statements | Agree (%) | Disagree (%) |
|--|-----------|--------------|
| Successful private business contributes to prosperity for all South Africans | 50 | 41 |
| There is still a great deal of discrimination against Africans in business | 91 | 4 |
| Private business offers the government lessons in how to be efficient | 36 | 32 |
| Private business mainly helps its owners and managers and does little for anyone else | 59 | 28 |
| Private business causes poverty by exploiting Africans | 53 | 32 |
| Private business has too much freedom, and should be more tightly controlled by government | 41 | 43 |
| Private businesses will only help the majority of people when they are African-owned | 24 | 62 |

Note: uncertain responses were omitted.

Private business does not come out of this very well. Although more than half of respondents agreed that it contributed to general prosperity, a huge majority thought that it discriminated against Africans; only slightly more than a third thought it was a model of efficiency; more than half thought it did very little for anyone other than its owners and managers; and more than half thought it caused poverty and exploited Africans, labour laws notwithstanding. Given this, it is hardly surprising that almost half thought the government should control business more closely.

Significantly, however, few respondents thought that African empowerment would help the majority of people. This is one indication among others that the views of the core African middle class differ significantly from those of the black empowerment elite, whose members often claim that their glittering success will somehow rub off on the African masses. In fact, tensions between the African core middle class and the BEE super-elite could easily emerge.

Table 4 records the way in which respondents ranked four factors contributing to national success, and compares this with the rankings provided by all Africans, and Africans and others with tertiary education.

The major contrast is between a self-reliant citizenry and those who place their hopes for development in a controlling and caring 'nanny state'. The African middle class responses are virtually identical to those of Africans with tertiary education. Whites are far more likely than everyone else to support self-reliance. Surprisingly, even more Indians than Africans opt for an interventionist state. Most surprising is how few people in any group see market competition and the profit motive as a vital factor in development, and the differences between groups are scarcely meaningful.

Table 4: Factors that help a country to become prosperous and successful (%)

| Factors | African core middle class | All Africans | Africans Tertiary | Coloured Tertiary | Indian Tertiary | White Tertiary |
|---|---------------------------|--------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| 1 Skilled, educated, and self-reliant citizens | 46 | 36 | 47 | 54 | 35 | 67 |
| 2 Government that cares for poor and guides economy | 35 | 43 | 37 | 33 | 48 | 11 |
| 3 A population with a strong sense of unity | 8 | 5 | 3 | 13 | 5 | 14 |
| 4 Trade unions and civic organisations that unite people and protect their rights | 5 | 9 | 5 | – | 5 | 4 |
| 5 Businesses that compete and work hard to make profits | 4 | 6 | 8 | – | 7 | 5 |

Table 5 reflects respondents' views on which types of economies South Africa should emulate.

Table 5: Examples of development that South Africa should follow

| Model countries | Support (%) |
|---|-------------|
| Rich countries – US, UK and Western Europe | 57 |
| 'Non-aligned' countries such as Cuba, China and Libya | 25 |
| Countries in Africa | 7 |
| East Asia | 2 |
| A mix | 2 |
| None: should go its own route | 6 |

Western market economies won hands down, despite the fact that the respondents spurned the role of the profit motive in development. Patterns within the sample were reasonably predictable, with people in large private or parastatal companies and SMMEs favouring the rich countries, and politicians, civil servants, and members of community-based organisations balancing their choices between the capitalist and non-aligned models. Perhaps surprisingly, about one third of the middle class respondents favoured non-western options. The responses show that the once dominant support for socialism among African intellectuals has been greatly weakened, but survives in a fairly formless sympathy for non-western alternatives.

Race and transformation

In open-ended questions, few respondents designated affirmative action and other race-based transformation policies as 'factors making for personal success and advancement', perhaps because many need to believe that their successes are based on merit. However, when questions about advancement and success offered such options, 38 per cent of respondents chose them. Forty per cent of the respondents believed that stronger government policies for African advancement were needed. Thirty five per cent agreed with the statement that 'South Africa is a country for Africans: whites should take second place', and 8 per cent 'strongly' agreed. Of the 65 per cent who disagreed, 34 per cent did so 'strongly', and 31 per cent 'to some extent'. In other words, their responses on the issue of socially engineered transformation were rather ambivalent.

Politics

Sixty four per cent of the interviewees (as against 68 per cent of all African respondents in the broader survey) indicated that they would vote for the ANC in the next general election. Alternatives veered leftwards (notably in 'second choice' responses) towards the SACP (3 per cent first choice, and 10 per cent second). Twenty three per cent indicated that they might vote for another party. Forty-nine per cent said they were 'satisfied' with government policy, and 11 per cent were 'very satisfied'. Twenty-four per cent were 'dissatisfied', and 15 per cent 'very dissatisfied'.

Because the core middle class sample included opinion leaders, more exact comparisons of the political sentiments of various classes can be derived from the national MarkData Omnibus results. Fifty-six per cent of all Africans surveyed said they 'strongly admired' the ANC, falling to 47 per cent among respondents with tertiary education. However, among Africans in LSM category 10, a close approximation of the core middle class, strong admiration for the ANC rose to 64 per cent. Whether it would care to acknowledge this or not, it seems as if the race-based transformation policies of the ANC have created an exceptionally strong bond between it and the African core middle class.

Thematic findings

Responses to the survey and interviews were submitted to a factor analysis. Treated in this way, the results supported the following propositions:

- **The new African middle class does not have a clear identity, or a high level of internal coherence.**

The core African middle class is certainly distinguishable from wider categories of better-educated and white-collar people, but is still not a coherent and consolidated social formation. Indeed, the very label 'middle' can attach a misleading unity to today's varied and complex occupational and status structures. While more than 50 per cent of respondents defined themselves as falling within the lower to upper middle classes, a substantial number seemed to identify with workers and the poor, and a small minority perceived itself as an 'elite'. The core African middle class is consequently not a self-conscious class with a coherent ideology. It can simultaneously be to the right of the 'ruling' class, and to the left of workers.

- **The African middle class has very recent origins, and is on a learning curve.**

The African middle class is clearly largely the product of very rapid and recent occupational mobility. Although it will grow more slowly from now on, due to skills constraints in the feeder occupations and the rationalisation in the public service, it will probably remain the fastest growing segment of the occupational market for some time to come. This growth will delay the emergence of a coherent self-definition, and will also keep this class on a steep learning curve in terms of responses to its situation. Under these circumstances, one cannot expect it to exercise a uniform influence on the economy.

- **Some class affinities are emerging that support a business-driven development path, but they coexist with widespread scepticism about business, and a belief in strong government.**

The survey and interviews both indicate that members of the African middle class as a whole and the core middle class in particular are both more private sector and mar-

The core African middle class is not a self-conscious class with a coherent ideology

ket-oriented than the African population at large. This, however, is not a consistent and coherent orientation. It can be described as a quadruple ideology, blending support for entrepreneurship and business-driven development with a rejection of privatisation, support for government intervention and redistribution, and even support for a nationalist development mission.

- **The African middle class is not yet revealing any marked convergence with the economically powerful white middle class, and its social networks contain few linkages with the white middle class**

While there is considerable support for business-driven development, many members of the African middle class regard the position and privileges of the white middle class as illegitimate. White wealth is rejected as predominantly the product of a racist past, and is perceived in terms of white greed. Only about 8 per cent of the interviewees named English- or Afrikaans-speakers among their two closest personal friends, and many of these people were not white. The informal social divide between the white and African middle class appears to be unaffected by the huge social transformation that has taken place in South Africa. Because of differences in the recreational interests, lifestyles, and tastes of African and white middle class families, everyday social interaction outside the workplace is taking a long time to emerge.

- **The area of least convergence between the African and white middle classes is that of party politics.**

Although the interviews revealed deep and abiding problems with many aspects of the ANC government's performance and policies (deviating strongly to both the left and the right of government), the ANC government provides them with economic leverage. Therefore, this class retains a powerful sense of solidarity with the ruling party, and former liberation movement. Misgivings about the ANC's performance were mainly expressed by bureaucrats, independent professionals, and community leaders.

Those misgivings, and a willingness among some respondents to consider political alternatives, suggest that the African middle class is not an ideological captive of the ANC. Its adherence to the party is a pragmatic choice, but there is little to suggest that it is anything other than a consistent, solidly based, and probably durable preference.

This class is no more inclined than the African population at large to support opposition parties, and less than one quarter would even consider any alternatives to the dominant party. Broadly, however, it seems as if not all members of the new African middle class are likely to strengthen or endorse hegemonic tendencies in government, and some may well become increasingly inclined to express strong dissent from within the party, thereby assisting the process of democratic consolidation. One of the biggest constraints on the emergence of an independent source of influence within the African middle class, however, is the mutual isolation of the African and white middle classes referred to earlier. There are no signs of social synergy among the racial segments of the middle class. At this stage there is simply too little informal and extra-occupational contact between them, and too little participation by the new African middle class in voluntary organisational activity independent of government and the corporate sector.

- **There is an alternative base for an effective convergence between the black and white middle classes.**

The findings strongly suggest that an alternative base exists for an effective accommoda-

There are no signs of social synergy among the racial segments of the middle class

tion between the African middle class and the white business and professional classes. This is the convergence of attitudes over issues such as education, child-rearing, child socialisation, savings, and investments. The results suggest that the African middle class, despite its small size and current economic marginality, is not at all like the elites in many sub-Saharan states. There is only a slight affinity with the 'Big Man' leadership syndrome of Africa. Its other norms and sensitivities display a marked resemblance with those of the white middle class. By and large, the our African middle class in South Africa heartily disapproves of the elite formations that have done so much to undermine the economic and political future of other African countries.

- **Engagement with 'civil society' through voluntary associations is limited and weak.**

Members of the African middle class largely belong to political parties, public service unions, and recreational or personal support associations. Very few participate in voluntary welfare, literary, environmental, cultural, lobbying, or hobby activities. The variety of linkages and networks that one would ideally expect of a middle class is lacking.

At the same time, however, one cannot be certain that the white middle class necessarily has a more committed and varied engagement with civil society. One encounters this kind of commitment at a fairly elevated level – among older and strongly established members of the upper middle classes. Due to its small size and relatively recent origins, the African middle class does not display high levels of active involvement in independent civil society. Given this, the involvement of the African middle class with party political organisations might at least be seen as offering opportunities for it to exercise influence in the political system. It is the best that one can expect, and not insignificant in terms of the strengthening of pluralism within the ruling party system.

- **The key interests of the African middle class are centred on occupational mobility; as such, affirmative action, employment equity, and empowerment policies are the main elements of its political commitment**

The aspirations of the African middle class in respect of occupational mobility and higher incomes have been well served by government policy since 1994. The task of moving rapidly towards the representative allocation of advantaged occupational and business opportunities is regarded as a mission to rid the society of a 'pathology,' namely the class advantages of the white minority that are seen to derive almost entirely from the effects of apartheid in South Africa, and colonialism elsewhere. However, a careful review of responses about whites' economic successes and the performance of white children at school suggests that at least one third and possibly up to 40 per cent of the African middle class concedes that white middle class socialisation has helped to ensure the occupational and educational success of the white minority. Similarly, more than one third of the African middle class respondents expressed reservations about racial preference policies, or rejected them fairly emphatically. On the other hand, about 60 per cent of the interviewees endorsed policies to ensure racial preference without qualification, and perceived white occupational success as an illegitimate consequence of racial discrimination.

Broadly speaking, then, the interviewees were split roughly 60:40 in terms of the necessity for accelerated affirmative action to improve African representation in middle class positions. This suggests that middle class support for affirmative action and African empowerment is unlikely to weaken soon. However, this is a rather self-centred com-

The African middle class does not display high levels of active involvement in independent civil society

mitment; only a quarter of the class believes that black economic empowerment holds benefits for poor people and the masses.

- **Religion could play a very important role in bridging the racial divisions in the middle class.**

Religion is a strong binding factor in South African society, and the African middle class is very religious by modern standards. Although not all the variations in religious sentiment are compatible with the Protestant ethic, which is held to be conducive to capitalist growth, religion does seem to underpin a sense of shared interests with whites and others, to the extent that such sentiments exist. Furthermore, the social values and lifestyle choices of many respondents suggest an ethic of deferred gratification and self-discipline. These sentiments may signal a capacity to generate confidence and self-reliance, with implications for development perhaps similar to the Pentecostal revolution in Latin America.

- **Members of the African middle class who are most satisfied with the government's performance also strongly support market-based development, and the role of business in development.**

The factor analysis shows that the 'economic conservatives' in the sample – ie, those who are most accommodating of private business and the realities of the market – are also most tolerant of government performance. Many respondents believed strongly that the government and the corporate sector had major shared interests, and were really part of the same broad camp. Affinities are rapidly being rearranged. Although white business experiences a gulf between itself and government, large segments of the African middle class see this gulf as minor compared to the gulf between mass sentiment and the stances of government. Hence business is most likely to find common ground with reasonably satisfied ANC supporters among the African middle class, and not with the dissenters of whatever persuasion.

One cause for concern seems to be the contradictory mindsets about growth and the private sector

Concluding remarks

This study was motivated by, among other things, the need to avoid the mistake of treating 'white collar' and 'middle class' as synonymous. Its aim was also to treat its subject, the emerging African middle class, as more important than merely establishing whether it is preoccupied with consumer spending and the property market. Rather, we were concerned about the deeper question of whether an emerging African middle class will strengthen a pluralist democracy, and augment the pool of attitudes, dispositions, and values supportive of private-sector-led economic growth.

While this is a ground-breaking study, it provides clues rather than answers, because the emerging African middle class is relatively small, growing rapidly, and is still too unformed in terms of attitudes and orientations to provide unambiguous evidence about these issues.

One cause for concern seems to be the contradictory mindsets about growth and the private sector. Widespread consensus about the importance of the private sector for creating jobs and boosting economic growth is contradicted by beliefs about the government's role in the economy, and profound scepticism about the legitimacy of business as an activity (at least as previously and presently constituted). In the light of these findings, the challenges of meeting transformation requirements in terms of employment equity and African economic empowerment in the private sector seem particularly daunting.

The problem is compounded by the social distance between the African middle class and its white counterpart. Of course, the feeling might well be mutual, although this by its nature has been a one-sided study. This sense of distance was manifested in evidence of a lack of networks between the two classes; and strong perceptions of the illegitimacy of white middle class wealth, skills, and social capital.

Given the degree of silent alienation from South African society manifested by the white middle class – for example, via high levels of emigration, both recorded and unrecorded – we may have to calculate the effects on growth of having two middle classes, each alienated in its own particular ways. The obvious axis of difference is affirmative action with, as we have seen, 40 per cent of our sample calling for stronger measures, and whites in general firmly rejecting this approach. On the other hand, there might be areas of convergence that this study may not have picked up. For example, such as growing between black and white middle class parents with children in the better public schools and in private schools.

While apparently rejecting assimilation with the white middle class, the emerging African middle class seems wary of assuming a distinctive place and role in wider African society. This is not particularly surprising, given its as yet small numbers, the continuing currency of vague but powerful communitarian ideas in African society, and the sensitive issue of widening inequalities among Africans, especially in the context of African economic empowerment.

The central conclusion towards which this study points is that the first wave of the emerging African middle class – largely formed by the transformation of the public sector – has not yet created a middle class that is sure of itself and its relations with other forces in society, particularly the private sector. The crucial question will be whether the transformation of the private sector itself will allow the emergence of an African corporate and entrepreneurial class (with professional offshoots) that will play a vigorous growth-supporting role in the broader transformation of South African society.

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Endnotes

- 1 The SAARF Living Standards Measure (LSM) is a widely used marketing research tool. It segments the South African market by grouping people according to their living standards, using criteria such as degree of urbanisation and ownership of cars and major appliances. It divides the population into ten LSM groups, with 10 the highest, and 1 the lowest.

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