

# FACT SHEET

## The emergent middle class and identity in contemporary South Africa

A comprehensive study on the emergent middle class and identity was undertaken by Stellenbosch University, Wits and the University of Pretoria. They confirm a dramatic expansion in the middle class. When using the R25 000 per person per year threshold (measured in 2000 prices), there has been a significant increase in the middle class (8% to 14%) and also the black share of the middle class from 11% to 42%. However, a complex picture emerges when one tries to understand these trends with further analysis:

### COMPLICATED MIDDLE CLASS IDENTITIES

- South Africans with middle class occupations that earn middle class salaries often do not think of themselves as middle class.
- Some members of the black middle class are uncomfortable with the “middle class” label, perhaps because of perceived tensions between racial identity and class identity due to apartheid associations between race and class
- There is little evidence of the so-called middle class values (i.e. values associated with the middle class), but religion is important to the black middle class.
- It may take time for a generation of newly affluent black South Africans to form coherent identities around class that can challenge strong racial identities
- More households moving into the middle class income bracket are unlikely to boost social cohesion and effective democracy if the rising income levels do not affect the identity and sense of belonging of these individuals
- It may therefore take much longer for social and political benefits of a growing middle class to manifest
- Hence, the research cautions against overoptimistic predictions of economic growth, effective democracy and social cohesion based on the growth of the black middle class in recent years.

### UNDERESTIMATING POSITION IN SOCIETY

- South Africans tend to underestimate their position in society and tend to see themselves as poorer than they actually are.
- Black South Africans are more likely to underestimate their position than others
- This may be related to the fact that the black middle class is less financially secure, partly because they have not yet accumulated savings and assets
- The young and the affluent are more ambitious in terms of their expectations of where they will be in two and five years' time
- Black South Africans also have higher expectations about how fast they will climb the economic ladder cf. other South Africans
- The middle class is also far more likely than lower classes to own their own house and car, consume durable products and – once they have accumulated such assets – to have insurance cover
- However, the middle class is only slightly more optimistic than other South Africans