



ARE AFRICAN MIDDLE CLASSES COMING TOGETHER?

The case of telecommunications employees in Kinshasa

Clélie NALLET

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Introduction

For many observers, a change in perception of the African continent occurred in the 2010s. Attention has focused on the relatively high rates of economic growth and a high population growth associated with urban expansion; both indicators interpreted as promises of economic “emergence” leading to potential new markets. The “African middle classes” have become key to these opportunities, particularly as they embody the hope of growth driven by the domestic market and that of a certain “social harmony”. The subject appears in the reports of international development institutions¹ and in 2011 the African Development Bank (AfDB) dedicated a study to it which promptly announced the emergence and expansion of the middle classes in Africa.² This idea was widely taken up by the media and private consulting firms.³

This enthusiasm was gradually accompanied by analysis in the academic environment.⁴ These studies highlight two main areas:

- The category “middle class”⁵, is particularly ambiguous and must be understood with caution. It is problematic, since it qualifies and encompasses various socio-economic situations, while suggesting a similarity in these situations, because of their assumed membership of a common socio-economic group. For example, what is the social significance of the size of the statistical group selected by the AfDB to define the African middle classes – a daily per capita consumption capacity between \$2 and \$20 in purchasing power parity?

1. World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects: Managing the Next Wave of Globalization*, 2007, available at: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org>. H. Kharas, “The Emerging Middle Class in Developing Countries, OECD Development Centre”, *Working Paper*, No. 125, 2010.

2. African Development Bank, *The Middle of the Pyramid: Dynamics of the Middle Class in Africa*, April 2011.

3. McKinsey Global Institute, *Lions on the Move: The Progress and Potential of African Economies*, Washington, June 2010. Deloitte, “The Rise and Rise of the African Middle Class”, *Deloitte*, 2012, available at: www2.deloitte.com.

4. D. Darbon and C. Toulabor (ed.), *L'invention des classes moyennes africaines. Enjeux politiques d'une catégorie incertaine*, Paris, Karthala, 2014. D. Resnick (ed.), “The Political Economy of Africa’s Emergent Middle Class”, *Journal of International Development*, vol. 27, No. 5, July 2015. H. Melber (ed.), *The Rise of Africa’s Middle Class. Myths, Realities and Critical Engagements*, Nordic Africa Institute, London, Zed Books, 2016.

5. The term “middle class” will be written interchangeably in the singular and plural. In this text, it is used as the object of research and not as a validated concept.

- The use of the “middle class” category is nevertheless proving to be heuristic, in the sense that it is indicative of a need: to understand the social changes under way in African countries in the plural contexts of rapid economic and demographic developments.
- From an empirical point of view, research conducted in various African countries has all shown the great diversity of socio-economic characteristics and practices of people in the “intermediate social space”⁶ (even though some common criteria exist). Nevertheless, the studies highlight different intermediate sub-groups that are relatively homogeneous (trajectories, similar practices and representations), for example groups mainly consisting of small business-owners or young entrepreneurs. Income, but above all social and economic capital, as well as age and professional status, make up significant variables of belonging to these groups.

In this context, it is risky to suggest a unifying analysis, encompassing the particularly varied socio-economic realities within the “middle class” label, and therefore, the economic, social, and political behaviours which are equally part of it.

It is necessary to examine specific case studies in order to understand the dynamics of this vast group in the “middle class” category. In order to identify the more noticeable, and hence more “predictable”, socio-economic dynamics, this study proposes to tighten the entry point of analysis, by focusing on a specific professional status, formal wage labour. This does not necessarily mean that all employees in the formal sector belong to the “middle class”, or that the latter consists solely of employees from the formal sector. Studies conducted in the field in Africa have shown that access to middle-class type social positions is helped by the presence of a stable income whether from formal or informal activity. It is rather more by the combination of formal and informal business activities, divided between different household members, or accumulated by the same person.⁷ Therefore, the idea is not to give an overview of the intermediate social situations, but to ask about the relationships between a formalized wage labour segment and access to a social group, and its impact on the debate about the African “middle classes”.

6. The concept of “social space” is used in social sciences to encompass similar socio-economic positions (here the intermediate positions) without assuming they belong to a common social group (here the “middle class”). P. Bourdieu, *Propos sur le champ politique*, Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2000.

7. P. Jacquemot (ed.), “Les classes moyennes en Afrique”, *Afrique contemporaine*, vol. 4, No. 244, 2012.

It was decided to focus on telecommunications employees. This sector is renowned for its strong socio-economic impact: it contributes significantly to growth in GDP and creates spillover effects on job creation, particularly by establishing extensive networks of agents, suppliers, and sub-contractors.⁸ This study assumes that this sector is involved in creating a pool of salaried professionals, which would be indicative of the formation dynamics of a certain type of intermediate social group.

However, asking these questions about Kinshasa is not self-evident. The second most populated city in sub-Saharan Africa⁹ – in which at least one out of ten Congolese live – has an *a priori* very unfavourable situation for formalising the middle classes:

- The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is one of the poorest countries in the world, and ranks 176th (out of 188 countries) in terms of the Human Development Index. Its gross national income, which amounted to \$380 per capita in 2014, is among the lowest in the world.¹⁰ According to the National Institute of Statistics (INS), seven out of ten households are poor in the DRC, eight out of ten in rural areas, and fewer than seven out of ten in urban areas.¹¹
- Business is largely dominated by the “informal” economy. According to the INS, the informal sector (agricultural and non-agricultural) employs 88.6% of the working population throughout the country, varying from 62.7% in Kinshasa to 94.8% in rural areas.¹²
- The political environment is characterised by “state failure”, which is reflected in particular, in its inability to provide the basic social services or to ensure the maintenance of infrastructure.¹³

8. For example, a study conducted in Haiti showed that the arrival of a new operator directly and indirectly contributed to a 20% growth in GDP between 2005 and 2007 and created 1,000 direct jobs, and indirectly provided income for 60,000 street vendors. See G. Barberousse, T. Bernard and V. Pescatori, “Les économiques et sociaux de la téléphonie mobile : étude de cas en Haïti”, *Secteur Privé & Développement*, No. 4, 2009.

9. According to the United Nations’ 2014 revisions, the capital has 12,071,000 inhabitants and is the second most populated city in sub-Saharan Africa after Lagos (Nigeria).

10. World Bank, *Vue d’ensemble RDC*, 2016, figures available at: www.banquemondiale.org.

11. National Institute of Statistics, *Résultats de l’enquête sur l’emploi, le secteur informel et sur la consommation des ménages/2012*, 2014.

12. *Ibid.*

13. T. Trefon (ed.), *Ordre et désordre à Kinshasa. Réponses populaires à la faillite de l’État*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2004.

The formal sector and wage labour are far from dominating the economy and the employment market. In Kinshasa, the 1990s were characterised by what researchers have called a “widespread multi-faceted crisis”.¹⁴ One of these major effects was an “informalisation” process, which experienced unprecedented development from 1990, a period of “collapse of the urban economy and the wage society”.¹⁵ The austerity of the structural adjustment measures contributed to a worsening of the employment situation and pauperisation of the population, leading to an “extraordinary crisis” in the 1990s.¹⁶ During this period, 250,000 civil servants were dismissed, and then the opening of markets and the “flood of imported products” in the capital resulted in the loss of 100,000 other jobs.¹⁷ The looting in 1991 and 1993¹⁸ “which devastated the city’s shopping and industrial centres” were “the final blow to Kinshasa’s wage society”.¹⁹ Then a “massive desalarisation” followed, related to significant job losses due to the closure of companies and the reduction in businesses, but also to the “derisory value of earnings, which are no longer even regularly guaranteed”, particularly in the public sector.²⁰ The wars of 1996 and 1998, as well as the armed conflicts have also resulted in the destruction of production equipment. Then, the socio-economic crisis struck all sections of the Kinshasa population, even the “middle class”, consisting of civil servants and business executives, who could live on their salaries decently up until the 1980s, and since 1990 have experienced “pauperisation and an unprecedented deterioration in living conditions”.²¹ In 1995, the “survivors of wage labour” were estimated at 5% of the working population in Kinshasa.²²

Currently, there no statistics on this particular point, but the last INS survey on standards of living in the DRC, dating from 2012, indicates that the number of employees has since increased. The salarisation level for the

14. *Ibid.* See also S Ayimpam, *Économie de la débrouille à Kinshasa. Informalité, commerce et réseaux sociaux*, Paris, Karthala, 2014.

15. S. Ayimpam, *Économie de la débrouille à Kinshasa. Informalité, commerce et réseaux sociaux*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

17. M. Davis, *Le pire des mondes possibles. De l'explosion urbaine au bidonville globale*, Paris, La Découverte, 2006.

18. This was the mass looting of factories, shops, and warehouses in Kinshasa, started in 1991 by the slum dwellers with the collusion of the army, and in 1993 at the initiative of the military only.

19. S. Ayimpam, *Économie de la débrouille à Kinshasa. Informalité, commerce et réseaux sociaux*, *op. cit.*

20. G. De Villers, *Phénomènes informels et dynamiques culturelles en Afrique*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1996, p. 78.

21. M. Falangani, “La paupérisation des familles petites bourgeoises et transformation des valeurs en période de crise”, in: G. De Villers (ed.), *Manières de vivre. Économie de la débrouille au Congo-Zaïre*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2002, p. 85.

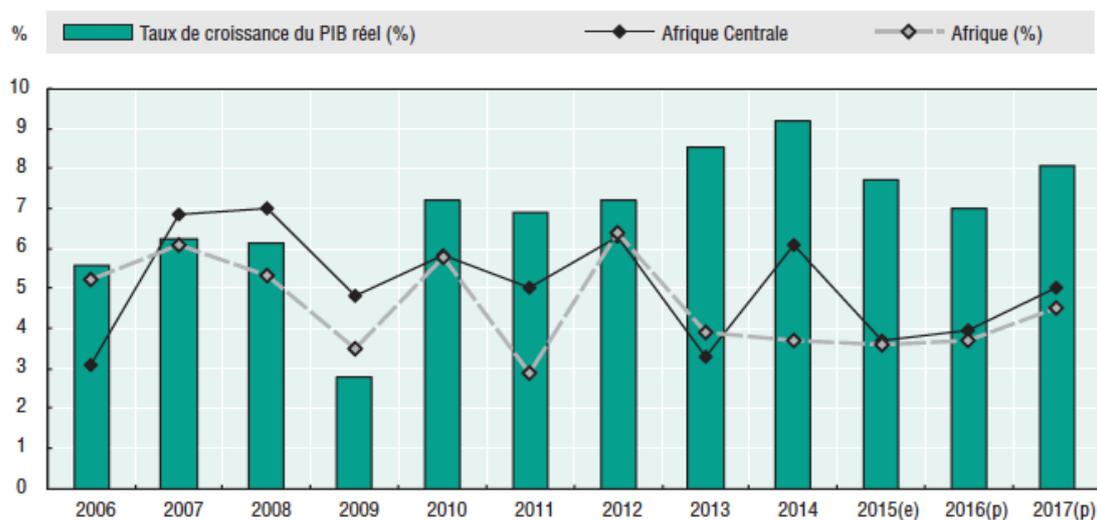
22. S. Ayimpam, *Économie de la débrouille à Kinshasa. Informalité, commerce et réseaux sociaux*, *op. cit.*

whole country, estimated at 6.9%, is particularly low. It is considerably higher in Kinshasa, representing 59.5% of the working population, of which 22.2% are public sector employees, and 15.1% are in the private formal sector (in rural areas, the proportions amount respectively to 4.8% and 0.4%).

The impact of the private sector is also difficult to calculate. It remained very low in 2011: the DRC would record around 4,000 formal and semi-formal businesses represented for the main part (3,000) by the Congolese Business Federation (FEC).²³ Only about 60 large businesses had more than 200 employees. Among the difficulties related to the business environment are: the weakness of state institutions, taxation problems, and widespread corruption.²⁴

More generally, some indicators have been more optimistic, particularly since the 2010s. After a slowdown to 2.8% in 2009, as a result of the international financial crisis, the DRC recorded uninterrupted economic growth with an average rate of 7.7% per year between 2010 and 2015, or above the average for sub-Saharan Africa.²⁵

Real GDP Growth Rate, Africa, Central Africa and DRC



Source: AfDB, OECD, UNDP, "Perspectives économiques en Afrique", RDC, 2016, p. 3.

Legend: Calculations (e); forecasts (p).

23. The FEC is the leading employers' association in the country and Chamber of Commerce and Industry under private law.

24. French Development Agency, "Programme de renforcement de capacités commerciales de la fédération des entreprises du Congo", fiche de présentation du projet, 2011.

25. World Bank, *Vue d'ensemble RDC*, op. cit.

Inflation peaked at a rate of 53% in 2009. It fell to 10% in 2010 and to 3% in 2012, before remaining at around 1% over the period 2013-2015. Socially, poverty remains widespread, but some progress may be emphasised, including a gain of 11 places in the world ranking in the 2014 Human Development Index.²⁶

The main drivers of growth in 2015 were the mining, transport and telecommunications, manufacturing, trade, and agriculture sectors. Despite falling world prices, mining production remains the main source of growth in the DRC. With a 16.5% share of GDP, agriculture is the country's main economic activity: it employs nearly 70% of the working population. The manufacturing sector's contribution is estimated at 13%. The tertiary sector contributes to 40.4% of growth in GDP (as opposed to 28% in 2014): a performance mainly due to the transport, telecommunications, and trade sectors.²⁷

Hence, this study has chosen to explore this tertiary sector which is clearly expanding. Here again, recent statistical sources are lacking in order to calculate the actual impact of this sector. However, reports indicate that it has a significant place in the capital city's economy and in job creation. Indeed, the economy in Kinshasa contributes 20% to the national GDP and its production amounts to 70% of the tertiary sector, the main provider of jobs (more than 30%) in 2011.²⁸ In the DRC in 2012, the service sector employs 10.8% of employees, closely followed by mining (10.4%), then industry (9.8%) and finally trade (4.8%).²⁹

The new information and communication technologies are now part of the Congolese economic landscape and have become one of the poles of diversification in the services sector. A 2005 OECD report already emphasised "the significant impact of the number of mobile phone subscribers on GDP", which grew from only several thousand in 2000 to 700,000 in 2004.³⁰ Since then, it has reached 28.231 million in 2013 and the number of operators in the DRC has doubled since 2012.³¹

26. *Ibid.*

27. AfDB, OECD, UNDP, *Perspectives économiques en Afrique*, RDC, 2016, available at: www.africaneconomicoutlook.org.

28. Ministry of Planning (DRC), *Document de la stratégie de croissance et de réduction de la pauvreté de seconde génération*, Kinshasa, vol. 1, 2011.

29. National Institute of Statistics, *Résultats de l'enquête sur l'emploi, le secteur informel et sur la consommation des ménages/2012*, *op cit.*

30. OECD, *Perspectives économiques en Afrique*, RDC, 2005.

31. Orange RDC (France), Africell (Lebanon) and Yozma Timeturns (YTT, Cyprus) entered the market at the end of 2014 and have joined Vodacom (South Africa), Bharti Airtel (India) and Tigo (a subsidiary of the Luxembourg-Swedish Millicom International Cellular, bought by Orange in 2016).

Mobile Telephone and Internet Subscribers, DRC, 2010-2014

In thousand	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Mobile Telephony	11,604	15,645	20,258	28,231	37,383
Penetration Rate	17.32%	21.58%	27.59%	37.33%	47.99%
Mobile Internet	200	590	649	2,167	6,116
Penetration Rate	0.29%	0.87%	0.88%	2.87%	7%

Source: Beltrade No. 37, "Zoom sur les secteurs: banques, assurances, et télécoms en RDC", June-July-August 2015, p. 29.

Data ARPTC-(e): extrapolation

The sector has become one of the main contributors to the state budget and one of the most important growth factors in GDP.³² It has also become an actual visual identity of Kinshasa through its pervasiveness in the urban public space.



32. "Zoom sur les secteurs : banques, assurances, et télécoms en RDC", *Beltrade*, No. 37, June-July-August 2015, p. 29.



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Employees in the mobile phone industry have emerged as a relevant entry point to examine the links between salarisation and formation of intermediate social groups. Although they represent a very small share of the population (a share which has steadily increased in recent years, particularly with the setting up of large companies), we think that these employees reflect the trends and socio-economic changes taking place in Kinshasa. They most likely already play a strong role in society's ability to remain stable despite the context of great poverty – particularly through their redistribution capacity – and are likely to play an essential economic and political role in the long term.

For the time being, the idea is to understand the impact of employee status on lifestyles in Kinshasa (the employees' own lifestyles and their influence at societal level, by considering their socio-economic relationships) and on societal positioning. More specifically, it is a question of asking for example: what are these employees' trajectories? Has their professional status changed their way of saving, consuming, self-defining, voting, etc.? The question of their potential formation/representation as a social group will be crucial. Do the practices of these employees tend to become homogenised? Do they feel that they belong to a particular group? Does release from the obsession with everyday needs result in a specific social self-positioning, in some practices (political, religious, consumer, etc.) or even the feeling of having a role in society?

These issues will be compared with those which cut across debates on the African "middle classes". By assessing these employees through their practices, we will be able to assess the relevance of the salaried "middle class" category in this context and its tendency to act as a societal group.

Self and Social Identity of Employees

This study is based on interviews conducted in Kinshasa with 55 employees.³³ 48 of them are employed in the mobile phone sector and have different professional positions.³⁴ They are technicians, team managers, salespeople, communications managers, receptionists, IT specialists, and direct sellers and work in private offices, shops, or share large *open spaces*. In order to highlight the specific features related to private sector wage labour, a comparison group has been set up, consisting of seven public sector employees, working in ministries or in government-owned companies.

Our samples provide a broad slide-show of these employees' situations. It is made up of men (40) and women (15)³⁵ aged from 24 to 58 years old (the median age of the sample is 35 years old)³⁶. They are all highly qualified: they have all completed higher education.³⁷ Their monthly salaries are over a broad scale, ranging from \$250 to \$3,500 with a median salary of \$1,000. These incomes are all above the average of Kinshasa, where "almost all households have less than \$50 per month".³⁸

33. The interviews took place during a two-week research trip in April 2016. The author would like to thank Jean-Jacques Mukoso and Flore Diria, students at the National Pedagogy University in Kinshasa, who took part in conducting them.

34. These interviews were conducted with employees working for three different operators. The majority of the interviews took place with Orange employees. The author would like to thank the people in management and the Human Resources Department at Orange who provided her with access in the field and facilitated her progress.

35. This proportion is relatively representative of that within the company.

36. 15 are between 24 and 30 years old, 14 between 31 and 35 years old, 15 between 36 and 40 years old, 5 between 41 and 50 years old, and 4 between 51 and 60 years old.

37. The number of students in higher and university education more than doubled between 2006 and 2012. In terms of numbers, they represented between 25% in 2006 and 33% in 2012. Kinshasa registered the highest number of students (2,167 students for 100,000 inhabitants). DRC Government, *Stratégie sectorielle de l'éducation et de la formation 2016-2025*, December 2015.

38. T. Trefon (ed.), *Ordre et désordre à Kinshasa. Réponses populaires à la faillite de l'État*, op. cit.

Varied profiles and multiple levels of wage labour

“Yes, of course I feel I am well paid and protected. Additionally, the health insurance is very important. When I change my glasses it’s free.” Interviewee 3, direct employee³⁹ (\$1,200 monthly), 26 years old.

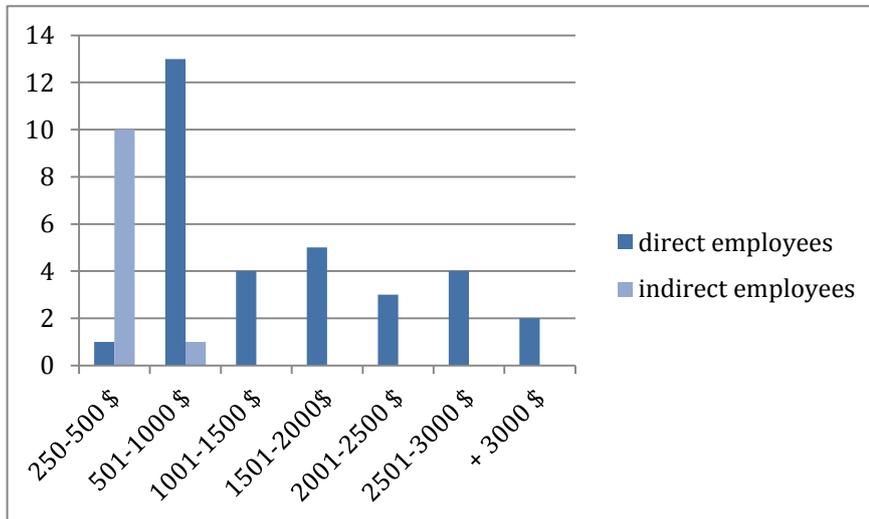
“Salaries are low and we don’t have health coverage. At the end of the year, we all get a small bonus: 5 chickens and half a bag of 12 kg of rice. And that’s all.” Interviewee 9, indirect employee (\$450 monthly), 30 years old.

The survey shows that the telecommunications sector creates diversified salary situations, even within a common open space. While situations and salary levels clearly vary depending on the roles performed and levels of responsibility, two distinct wage labour levels emerge – direct and indirect employees. Indirect employees are employees of local companies sub-contracted by the telecommunications companies. They generally have less skilled jobs than people who are direct employees (for example greeters, salespeople, direct sellers).

Our sample is made up of 36 direct employees and 12 indirect employees, who often mix together (present in the same workspace), but above all are differentiated (a significant objective and perceived difference in standard of living). Indeed, the form of contracts of employment and the related pay of the first group provides them with markedly more comfortable living conditions. The salaries of direct employees vary between \$400 and \$3,500 per month, with a median of \$1,315. Their contracts of employment are also more secure: they are generally permanent contracts providing significant social benefits, such as health insurance. The majority of them deem their salary to be “sufficient”. This is not the case for indirect employees, whose monthly income varies between \$240 and \$640 (the median is \$400). Generally, they are employed *via* a sub-contracting system in the form of renewable fixed-term contracts, and their salary may vary according to the results achieved, with some claiming they are paid daily. Their situations are significantly more precarious, and security and contractual benefits are almost non-existent.

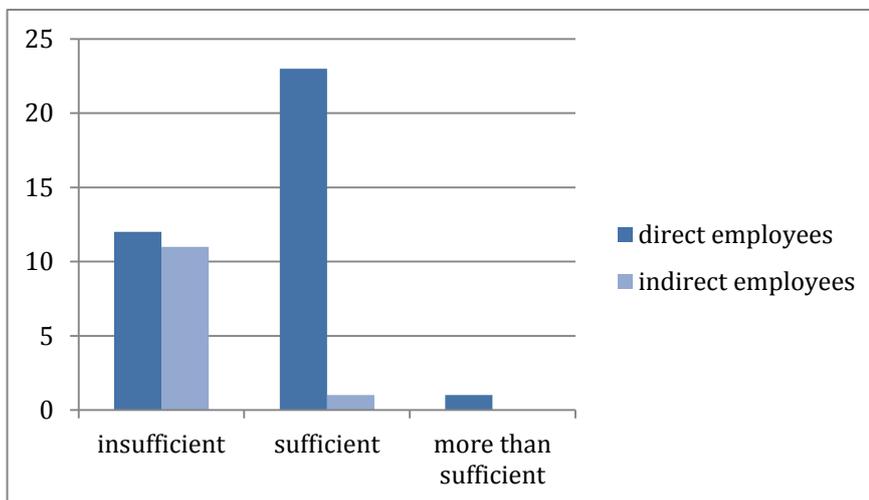
39. The differences between indirect and direct employees will be explained in the following paragraphs.

Income Levels of Employees Surveyed (Direct and Indirect)



Source: author's survey, Kinshasa, April 2016.⁴⁰

Assessment of the Income Level by Employees Themselves (Direct and Indirect)



Source: author's survey, Kinshasa, April 2016.

40. This graph and the following ones are based on the author's survey of telecommunications employees. Based on their statements during the interviews, about 20 answers were coded in order to set up a database of the 55 employees interviewed. The graphs from this study, generally identify the characteristics relating to the 36 direct employees and those of the 12 indirect employees. The numbers on the Y-axis correspond to the number of employees involved.

Is being an employee in the private sector a choice?

“I started working here a bit by chance. Tigo gave young people the opportunity to do professional internships. I did that for a year and then they hired me. It wasn’t my initial ambition, but I will have to make do. Brilliant people cannot find work.”
Interviewee 4, direct employee (\$2,000), 32 years old.

Apart from those who have jobs requiring specific technical skills, particularly in IT and marketing, the respondents did not *a priori* feel they were particularly destined for a job in the telecommunications sector. Graduates in international relations, economics, social sciences, or politics, they were rather planning to be journalists, diplomats, academics, or for some, politicians. A majority of them stated they had fallen into their jobs “by chance”, or even “by accident”. At issue, is a saturated labour market for these young graduates,⁴¹ who have had to “adapt” to it. Interviewee 7, who has been employed in the telecommunications sector for 12 years, states: “There is no link between my studies and this job. My first job was in telecoms. So far, I’ve adapted to the jobs that I’ve found.” Indeed, it is not uncommon for a receptionist to have a degree in financial administration.

Despite the discrepancy between their role and their degree, the lack of opportunities, but also the prospects of salary mobility, can encourage employees to continue in the telecommunications sector. So, interviewee 44, a sales assistant in a shop (an indirect employee) and a marketing graduate hopes “perhaps, one day to become a direct employee, even, why not, work in her area of expertise”. Moreover, this hope is perhaps not in vain: in our sample, there are about ten people who have gradually climbed the pay scale.

41. According to the last INS household survey conducted in 2012, the 15-35 age group represents more than 25% of the population and has an unemployment rate of 28%. National Institute of Statistics, *Résultats de l'enquête sur l'emploi, le secteur informel et sur la consommation des ménages/2012*, 2014.

Interviewee 36: “from survival to living”

Interviewee 36, who is 32 years old, has been working in the mobile phone sector since graduating from the Higher Institute of Applied Technology in Kinshasa, almost 10 years ago. He began his career as a day worker in a telecommunications company with a “miserable salary”. He then became a sub-contractor for another company and earned \$ 235 per month.

Slowly, he went up through the ranks and partly “due to a recommendation”, he became a direct employee of Orange in 2014, as a Maintenance Follow-up Manager. With his monthly \$1,200, he can “finally save” and his medical care is taken care of, although he has “never been ill”. Overall, he is very satisfied with the change in his situation and said he has “finally passed from survival to living”.

However, he regrets that the company “has given him nothing” for his recent marriage that his new salary finally allowed him to pursue. For their part, his colleagues made a “small collective gesture” for this occasion.

Not all the interviewees “came by chance”. There are also those, usually with positions with higher responsibilities, who state that they chose their position. So, interviewee No. 6, an auditor with a salary of \$2,500 describes how she came to work in the mobile phone field as a real strategy: “For seven years, I worked in the same company as my husband, an external audit firm. Then, I heard that they were hiring at Orange. This enabled us to diversify our portfolio and not depend on a single company.” For these employees, the scope of interprofessional mobility is wider.

These reports are indicative of a multi-level labour market. An initial level where the choice is made by default and a second more strategic, enabled by greater professional experience, an already developed network and/or more sought-after skills. The relationship network is essential for obtaining a contract: whether it is for a shop job or for a team leader’s job, most employees state that they have been recommended by an acquaintance.

Private sector and public sector: protections and representations

“Being employed is somewhat reassuring, I’m sure that I’ll have my salary at the end of the month. In the private sector you can be fired, but not in the public sector. However, there are companies which pay well like the oil companies, some banks and telecommunications companies too.” Interviewee 43, direct employee (\$1,000), 42 years old.

“In the private sector, they expect a lot, but don’t give much. The state remains the best employer, as it ensures a job for life. Even beyond, if a civil servant dies their family continues to receive a part of their salary.” Interviewee 24, indirect salary (\$250), 31 years old.

Generally, the interviewees find their employed status “reassuring” as it provides them with a regular salary. Nevertheless, they are divided about the degree of protection they enjoy. Some are fully convinced of this: “There are advantages to being employed: whatever problem you have, you have a guarantee. I feel protected by my job.” (interviewee 50). However, for many, this security is more relative. Firstly, for indirect employees, who feel vulnerable, as they are uncertain their contracts will be renewed, and also to a lesser extent for direct employees. Indeed, half of direct employees share their concerns. While they feel relatively well protected by their employment contracts, they fear being dismissed in a sector where the “competition is fierce” and sometimes the future of telecommunications companies is uncertain.⁴² Generally, dependence on the employer and on “long employee work days” is not well received. On this subject, interviewee 24 states: “From 08.00 am to 19.00 pm we are here, we cannot do another job. Here, the only advantage is that I am getting professional experience.” Some speak of tiredness, others go further: “The public sector gives you free time. You can finish at 15.00 pm. It’s too lazy for me. But, if you remain in the private sector all your life, you end up having a stroke.” (Interviewee 3.)

If these work days are perceived as being too long, it is actually partly because they are regularly compared with those of civil servants. With regard to the latter, interviewee 8 states: “People breathe over there. The people are relaxed. They finish at 15.00 pm. Then, you can’t be fired for no reason.” The stability of the civil servants’ status is particularly envied by

42. At the time these interviews were conducted, Orange was buying Tigo and many Orange employees were afraid of being replaced by a person with the same type of role at Tigo.

indirect employees.⁴³ The salaries of the seven civil servants interviewed are between \$500 and \$1,000. They are therefore not significantly higher than those of indirect employees, but their standard of living is objectively more comfortable (see the inset on interviewee 25). Moreover, it is not the civil servants' salaries which are envied, but all the "extras" that the civil servants can make with trips and their *per diem* allowances, or even through petty corruption.

Interviewee 25: a satisfied civil servant

Interviewee 25 is a civil servant in the General Tax Directorate and his monthly salary is \$700. His wife has the same role and they have three children and agreed to have no more. What inspired him to become a civil servant, were the "standards of living". "We are not always well paid, but the bonuses and the *per diem* allowances are often higher than salaries." He thinks that his family has "a normal life": "We pay the rent and we educate our children." Even though he does not live far from work, he goes by car to take advantage of the fuel benefits (\$300 per month).

With regard to the office hours, he says: "I go there when I'm interested." He explains: "Sometimes you go and we are so many that there is no office space. But the normal day is supposed to be from 8.30 am to 16.00 pm." These highly flexible days allow him to take care of his "own business" at the same time: "In my spare time, I offer investment advice for people who want to open any type of business, a library or a cybercafe for example." In addition, he has a third source of income: "We own houses in the country. We rent them out and we save this money in our children's bank accounts." He concludes: "I am very satisfied with my standard of living." These practices generate substantial additional income (\$1,000).

Almost all direct employees would not however exchange their status for that of a civil servant. They feel that their salary level could not be reached in the public sector (or more rarely). However, they also envy their much shorter work days. Not necessarily because they are less tiring, but because it gives them time to develop other profitable activities. In order to supplement their incomes, ultimately the majority of employees indeed plan to open "a production unit" (shop, pharmacy, cybercafe, etc.) in time. Seven employees have already achieved this project, and others complain of the lack of time or resources, which deprives them of an additional income.

43. The civil servants' identification number is perceived as a blessing, ensuring security for their family, even beyond their own existence.

From security to independence: becoming an entrepreneur?

“I have a career plan; I want to start my own company. Additionally, the government is now promoting entrepreneurship. I will start a food business, or perhaps a marketing research consultancy, whatever, we will see.” Interviewee 4, direct employee (\$2,000), 32 years old.

“I want to get involved in politics, but not immediately, firstly I have to gain a certain status which would enable me to enter into politics to serve and not to be used.” Interviewee 12, indirect employee (\$250), 32 years old.

Opening a “production unit” is usually seen as the first step in a more long-term career plan: “to become independent and become an entrepreneur”. The idea is to gradually achieve this status, to “grow”: “I am small and I want to become very big. I want to be independent.” (Interviewee 20.) Ultimately, it is a question of doing it “in their own way”, “with their schedules” and of “being free”.

From this point of view, wage labour is perceived as a step to obtain experience, and above all, to accrue the funds required to carry out the entrepreneurial plan. Interviewee 23, a young lawyer, explains: “I intend to be a self-employed lawyer. But before that, I need enough money to get started.” This dynamic was moreover highlighted in a study of entrepreneurs in the city of Kisumu in Kenya.⁴⁴ Many of them became entrepreneurs by starting their “personal business”, while they were still employed, in order to minimise the risks. They now perceive their independence as a “deliverance from wage labour and freedom from long work days for low salaries”.

The goal is common: freedom from wage dependence. However, the stories and careers of our employees show that they are caught in a more complex security/independence tension. The value of independence appears in some cases to be more of a logical position than a concrete career plan. The contractual relationship of dependence is usually associated with a significant counterpart: important protections that are not so easily given up.

44. M. Voigt, “Social Mobility of Middle-Class Entrepreneurs in Kisumu”, paper presented at the *Inequality and Middle Class Development in Africa* conference, Cape Town, 4-6 May 2016.

Wage labour, social representations and frustrations

“You get the impression that those in an office are rich, but it’s not true.” Interviewee 2, direct employee (\$1,380), 33 years old.

“I am a manager and the transport problem should be settled.” Interviewee 14, direct employee (\$2,000), 40 years old.

“I think that in Kin the standard of living is low: look outside!” Interviewee 24, indirect employee (\$250), 30 years old.

For the indirect and direct employees with the lowest salaries, the image projected by the status of an employee in a telecommunications company is a source of frustration. In addition to the inadequacy between their level of study and their salary level, they highlight the gap between how they feel they are perceived by their compatriots and the realities of their living standards. They feel far from their much-touted desirable and prosperous status. This illusion particularly affects interviewee 5, a direct employee whose salary is among the lowest in the sample: “It gets on your nerves not having money for your children and working in telecoms. [...] Everywhere people know that I work in a prestigious company. My family feels insulted. We should not have to worry about our everyday needs.”

In these situations, being an employee is a source of symbolic violence. Because being an employee in a prestigious company and working in an office located in the capitals’ business centre, is supposed to mean being finally released from daily economic worries. Furthermore, the interviewees regularly associate the status of employee with that of middle class: “The middle class are people who earn their living honestly through work. They may take over the premiership at 30.” (Interviewee 11.)

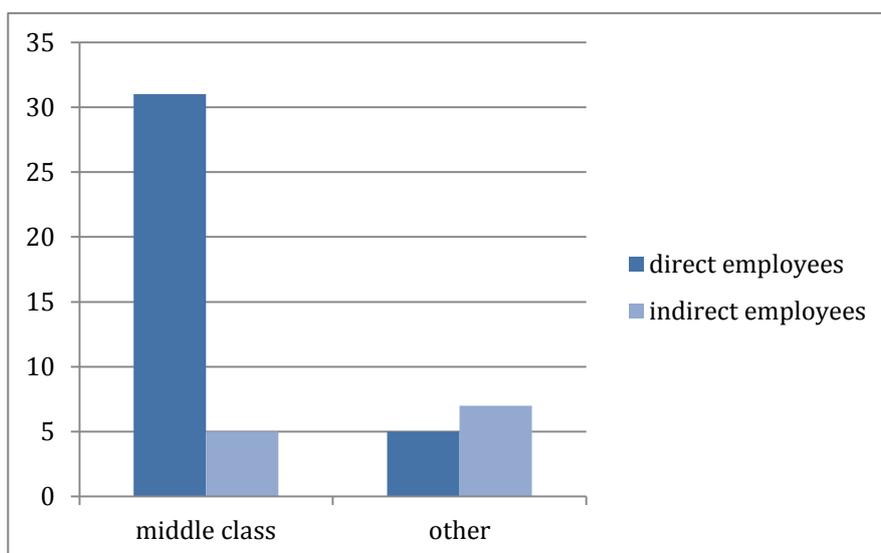
Self-positioning: wage labour and middle classes

“With the arrival of the multi-nationals which has emphasised the wage scale in the banking and telecommunications sector, the middle class exists in Kinshasa.” Interviewee 15, direct employee (\$3,500), 35 years old.

“I’m middle class. It’s the class which helps us survive and we do not have everything we want, but we still get by.” Interviewee 54, direct employee (\$523), 32 years old.

“My standard of living is very low. Good according to the standard of living in Kinshasa, it is not too low. I can pay for my brother’s studies. But, I can’t make any mistakes.” Interviewee 9, indirect employee (\$450), 30 years old.

Social Self-Positioning of Employees



Source: author's survey, Kinshasa, April 2016.

The majority of our employees (41/55) feel that they belong to the middle class.⁴⁵ This feeling is widespread among direct employees (31/36) and affects almost half of the indirect employees (5/12). The same expression occurs regularly: being middle class in Kinshasa, is being able to “make ends meet at the end of the month”.

45. Others self-position as “poor” and eight of them consider that the middle class does not exist in Kinshasa, that there are only “the rich and the poor.”

While literature on the African middle classes shows that the latter are mostly defined by the negative, as “neither rich nor poor”, our employees tend to position themselves exclusively compared to the poorest and compared to the “worst”. The surrounding situation of extreme poverty influences how these employees position themselves on the social scale: “I am middle class, I would say that my standard of living is fairly comfortable, especially when I look around me.” (Interviewee 4) Or even “The poor lack bread, but not me.” (Interviewee 23). Additionally, the interviewees share the feeling that the middle class represents a small part of the Kinshasa population, and it is described as “almost non-existent,” or as forming an “exception”. Interviewee 2 states: “We are middle class, but we do not represent the population. In Kinshasa, there are many people who have never seen an electrified district. We really are an exception.”

So, for the majority of our employees, the middle class in Kinshasa is narrow – and they are its representatives. It is now a question of taking an interest in the objective social positioning of these employees, by deciphering their practices and their lifestyles.

Is There a Move towards a Middle Class of Salaried Professionals?

“Sacrifice is a pervasive phenomenon in today’s Kinshasa: Kinshasans spend entire days without swallowing any food, without having water, firewood or coal, and continue to live on the fringes of health care facilities. They are deprived of everything: leisure, as well as the possibility of organising their schedule as they choose; of political participation, like the most basic safety. Parents have to choose from their children which one will go to school this year and which one will do the same the next year. Worse, this rotation that the Kinshasans call ‘offloading’, is also applied to food consumption: also, the parents are forced to let some of their children eat one day and the others the next day.”⁴⁶

With regard to this change in living standards for the Kinshasans, our mobile phone employees are all far from these situations of extreme poverty. At least, while the sacrifice in different forms is not missing from the employees’ everyday life – no one combines all these forms of deprivation and shortages (food, water, political participation, leisure, offloading). By studying the employees’ economic and social practices, we will be raising the question of their local socio-economic positioning.

Their practices reflect their wage situations: diverse. Nevertheless, major trends are emerging, which reveal different social dynamics and positions. While indirect employees are in situations where the management of everyday needs is pervasive, the direct employees’ practices are indicative of an ability to plan for the future and for better things, corresponding to different intermediate social positions.

46. T. Trefon (ed.), *Ordre et désordre à Kinshasa. Réponses populaires à la faillite de l’État*, op. cit., p. 16.

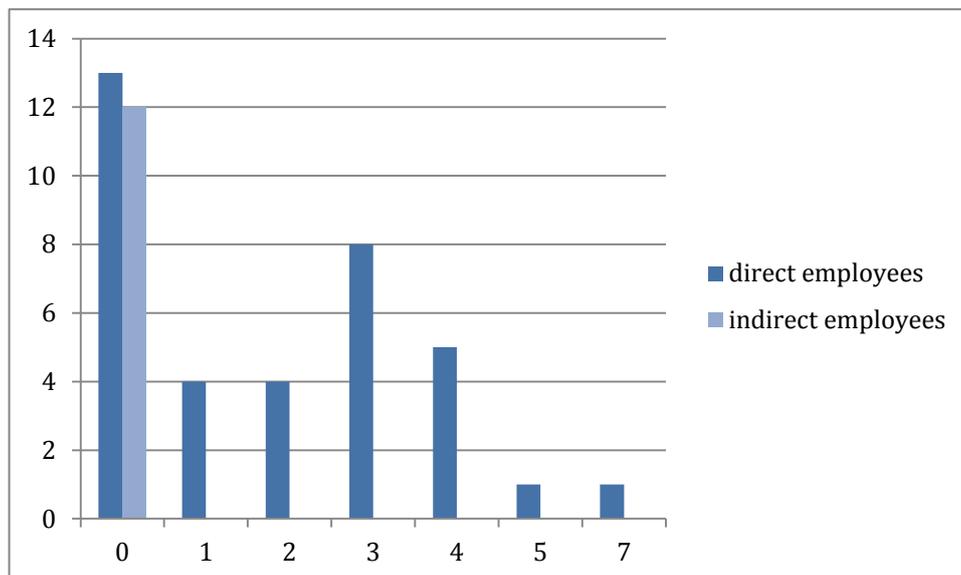
Building their household: ambitions and plans

“Three children are the max. I will give them what I didn’t get. I’m from a large family, I even had two mums. On the other hand, we all studied. My father really wanted it, even not eating.” Interviewee 2, direct employee (\$1,380), a father of 3 children, 33 years old.

“Being well paid would mean saving. There I do not earn enough, I would risk making my wife suffer. That’s why I’m not married yet.” Interviewee 24, indirect employee (\$250), bachelor, 30 years old.

“I’m 22nd in a polygamous family of 26 people. For me, there’s no question. I want 0 or 1 child. A well-nurtured child costs money and takes time.” Interviewee 3, direct employee (\$1,200), bachelor, 26 years old.

Employees’ Number of Children



Source: author’s survey, Kinshasa, April 2016.

All of the indirect employees, as well as a significant portion of indirect employees (13/36) do not have children.⁴⁷ The others have from 1 to 7 children, with an average of 3 children.⁴⁸ The general trend is clearly to reduce the number of children in one generation. Indeed, our employees have grown up in much larger families, which were sometimes polygamous, made of about 10 to 30 people. Although some men still wanted to extend their family to 6 children, they said that they would not consider becoming polygamous. Interviewee 67, a father of 4 children, explains: “We are from the Luba tribe and so we really like large families. On the other hand, polygamy never crossed my mind. I’ve seen how parents were struggling to survive.” Three-quarters of employees said they had spent their childhood in difficult economic conditions, sometimes in rural areas, and are experiencing upwards social mobility.

Thus, the nuclear family model is thought of as a means of meeting the family’s needs, but also of ensuring its “success”. These controlled family strategies aim to realise these ambitions of socio-economic mobility, partly by proxy for the future generation. Hence, interviewee 13 concedes: “My standard of living is better than before. Finally, above all it’s my children’s that is better.”

The belief in education as a means of social advancement is high among these employees. Moreover, education was often already a priority for the employees’ parents. Private schools are chosen for their quality (and depending on each individual’s resources), rather than for their closeness. The children of employees are often educated in Catholic-subsidised schools, renowned for the quality of their teaching. The tuition costs incurred per child are high: ranging from \$300 and \$2,500 per year (median at \$950). Many employees state that they wish to resume their studies for “knowledge” or with a view to “updating themselves”, to adapt to “a dynamic rapidly changing world” (interviewee 3).

The reduction in the number of children goes hand in hand with a significant increase in the age of marriage. The single employees are between 24 and 38 years old and their parents, for their part, married at around 20 years old. Here again, economic reasons are mentioned to explain this situation of “late singlehood”, which according to interviewee 15 is difficult to handle vis-à-vis the social circle.

47. The group of indirect employees is also younger (less than 35 years old).

48. The average size of households is 4 in the DRC. There are more households in the capital. In the capital, extended households are the most common (42.1%) and the number of single-parent households is higher (22.1% as opposed to 13.2% in rural areas). National Institute of Statistics, *Résultats de l’enquête sur l’emploi, le secteur informel et sur la consommation des ménages/2012*, op. cit.

Interviewee 15: marriage, expenses and social pressure

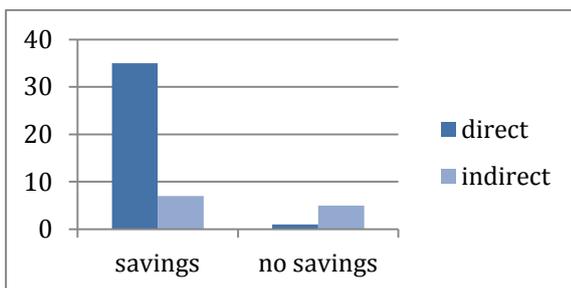
“Here, it’s cultural. A private wedding is not viewed well. A large party involves great expense. In order to get married, the most important thing is not money, but stability. Once you have a stable life with a job. Even if the salary is not very high, you can think of marriage. Here, you can be the CEO, if you are single you’re worthless. It’s better to earn \$100 and be married. Given that I earned a lot of money, it was considered a bad thing that I was not married. I had to put myself below the poverty threshold for these celebrations to take place.”

These social dynamics (reduction in the number of children, longer period of youth, important place of education) are typical of those of the African middle classes.⁴⁹

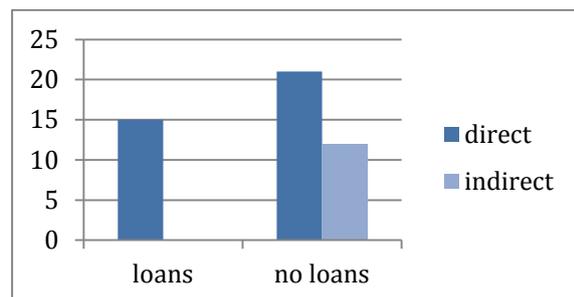
Budget management and upward mobility strategies

“Being middle class is actually saving, being able to take out a loan, and helping people.” Interviewee 5, direct employee (\$750), 35 years old.

Employee Savings



Employee Loans



Source: author’s survey, Kinshasa, April 2016.

Our employees’ practices are rooted in a “dollarized” and highly banked economy, which contrasts with the surrounding socio-economic context. The direct employees all have a bank account, which they save in

49. See C. Nallet, “Identifier les classes moyennes africaines : diversité, spécificités et pratiques de consommation sous contrainte”, *Notes de l’Ifri*, Ifri, December 2015.

every month. The number of bank accounts per family is often high. Indeed, it is not unusual for accounts to be opened on behalf of the children in order to guarantee their education in expensive private schools. Saving is a key goal for our employees. Although one of them stated they were not managing to save, the majority (26) said that they saved small amounts and nine employees saved more substantial amounts (between 30% and 50% of their income). This is the case for interviewee 36, 32 years old, a bachelor and a Maintenance Follow-up Manager. He manages to save almost half of his income (\$600 out of \$1,250). Interviewee 11, although having a lower salary, does the same (\$400 out of \$776). They both mention “strict discipline”, the aim of which is to accrue the funds needed to achieve their investment plans (buying a plot of land and building a house for the former and opening up his own consultancy firm for the latter).

These practices are typical of the “middle classes” for whom savings are key. However, the employees are not investing in informal “tontine” type saving systems,⁵⁰ and hence are moving away from practices highlighted by studies of the middle classes in other African countries.⁵¹ The method is different, but the strategy is the same: it is a matter of managing the household budget sparingly in order to be able to save monthly, even small amounts. These practices reflect an ability to plan for the future and for the better – an important characteristic of intermediate social groups. The way in which direct employees envisage their future is moreover indicative of this ambition for upward social mobility. A return “to being worse off” is unthinkable for them. Indeed, to the question “what would you do if your income were to decrease?”, they answered that they “could not live with less”, and are certain that “this won’t happen”. Some state that “it will inevitably get better and better”. These projections contrast with those of indirect employees, who although they have more limited budgets, foresee a deterioration in their financial situation. Hence, interviewee 12 states: “If my income drops, we will have to readjust again, and as usual, cut some costs. We will just see where this can still lead us. We have already experienced this type of situation.” Although it is difficult for them to save, 7 out of 12 indirect employees state that they save small

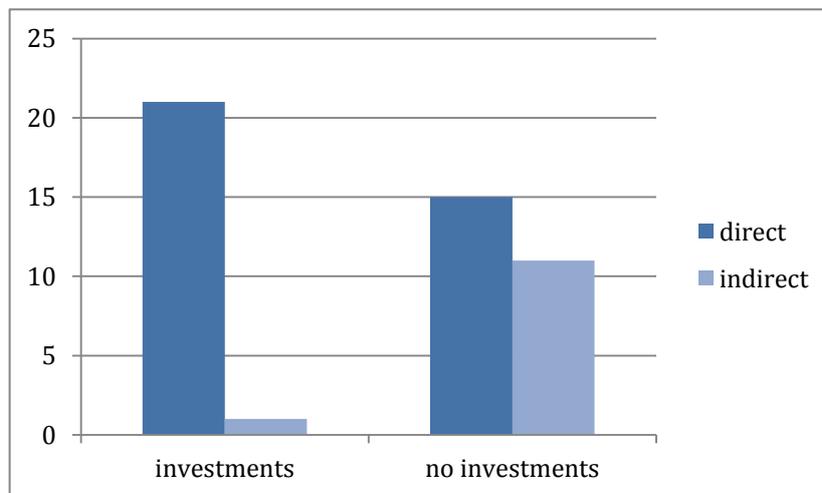
50. Employees are investing solely in the banking system. Their position as an employee indeed causes them to be automatically rooted in it (salaries paid to a bank account, bank savings are needed to obtain credit). This characteristic may also be interpreted as a means of distinguishing themselves socially. Indeed, saving in “tontines” is described as a practice for traders in the informal sector.

51. E. Escusa, “We Try to Save Every Month. L'épargne au cœur du positionnement de l'entre-deux des 'ni riches ni pauvres' en Afrique du Sud”, *Notes de l'Ifri*, Ifri, January 2016. Y Mintoogue, “L'épargne des classes moyennes au Cameroun. Une économie en marge du système bancaire”, *Notes de l'Ifri*, Ifri, March 2017.

amounts each month, intended to guard against “worse-off times” (dismissal and possible illnesses).

Regarding the use of bank credit, the higher the employees’ incomes, the more they use credit. Indirect employees are ineligible for credit. Almost half of the direct employees have outstanding credit (15/36). The others want to use it, but for the time being do not have sufficient guarantees. Membership of the company, which implemented a system favouring access to credit, is perceived positively here. Access to credit is an important objective for the employees. For example, interviewee 1 would like his salary to increase to improve his chance of having “good credit”. Interviewee 2, is trying to pay back the loan he took out to buy a car, in order to take out another loan to buy a house. Interviewee 6 (30 years old, \$2,500 per month) has already taken out three loans: one to finance his studies, a second for his marriage, and a third for a car. Credit is also an accumulation strategy/diversification of resources. It is often used to invest in a production unit, or in a house which will be rented out to accrue income.

Employees’ Investments



Source: author’s survey, Kinshasa, April 2016.

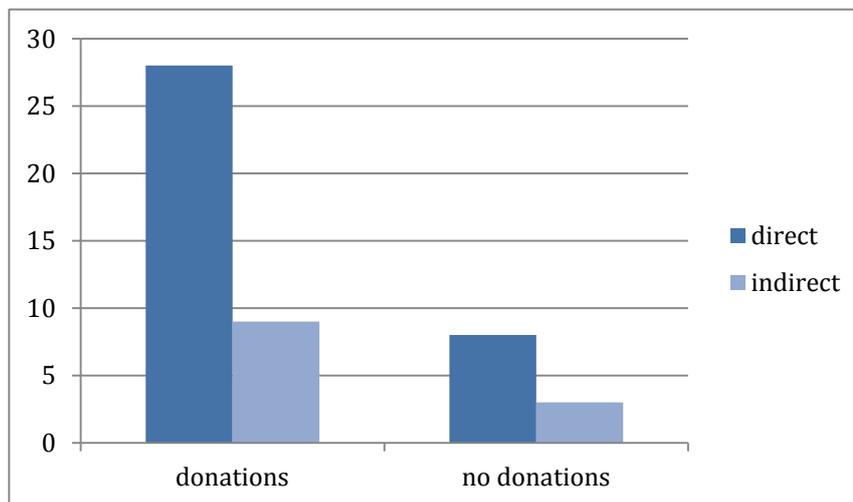
Furthermore, more than half of direct employees (21/36) have already made an investment. Twelve have invested in a plot of land, six in a production unit, and three in both. These budgeting practices fall under well-known upwards mobility strategies in literature on the middle classes. Their aim is to combine a property (housing or production unit) with a regular income (permitted here by the status of employee): a favourable

combination to go from an average income situation to an upper middle-class position.⁵²

Redistribution, pragmatism and social status

Half of Kinshasans only eat once a day and a quarter of them only eat once every two days. Therefore, power, prestige and social status accumulate for those who are able to eat or distribute food or money (which will be used to provide others with food).⁵³

Employees' Money Donations



Source: author's survey, Kinshasa, April 2016.

The idea of redistributing/helping is important for all employees. Indirect employees often distribute more than they save. Proportionally, they give as many donations of money as direct employees (in blue on the graphs, respectively 9/12 and 28/36). It is mostly small amounts which vary depending on the available income. In the direct employee group, 19 stated that they make small donations of money and nine that they make larger donations.

This is the case for interviewee 17, whose income is among the highest in the sample (\$3,000), who, in addition to providing for his wife's and three children's needs, hosts a niece, and indirectly supports ten other people (education or food costs). He states: "It's a few, some here are supporting 30 people."

52. C. Lentz, "African Middle Classes: Lessons from Transnational Studies and a Research Agenda [sic]: *Agenda*", in: H. Melber (ed.), *The Rise of Africa's Middle Class*, London, Zed Books, 2016.

53. T. Trefon (ed.), *Ordre et désordre à Kinshasa. Réponses populaires à la faillite de l'État*, op. cit., p. 25.

Indeed, the requests are numerous and are meticulously sorted by the employees. For example, interviewee 3, a young woman aged 26 years with a monthly salary of \$1,200, states: “Yes, I give but I am not forced to, I give when I want to. For example, for studying, I automatically give.” So, donations to immediate family (a younger sister or a grandfather) and for reasons deemed respectable (studies) or inevitable (healthcare) are largely favoured by our employees. This is still a typical characteristic of the “African middle classes” who are not entirely cut off from the solidarity system, but think about it selectively and vertically. Interviewee 3’s subsequent account reveals another pragmatic aspect of this solidarity system: “The donation is also investment. Because when the person you’re helping, finishes their studies, they find a good job and you are released. And this person will also support you one day. Plus, it feels good when you pay towards someone’s education.” Thus, it is more a system of reciprocity, according to which the donation implies a counter-donation, a consequence according to the researcher Gauthier de Villers, of the “material constraints” which weigh on Kinshasa society.

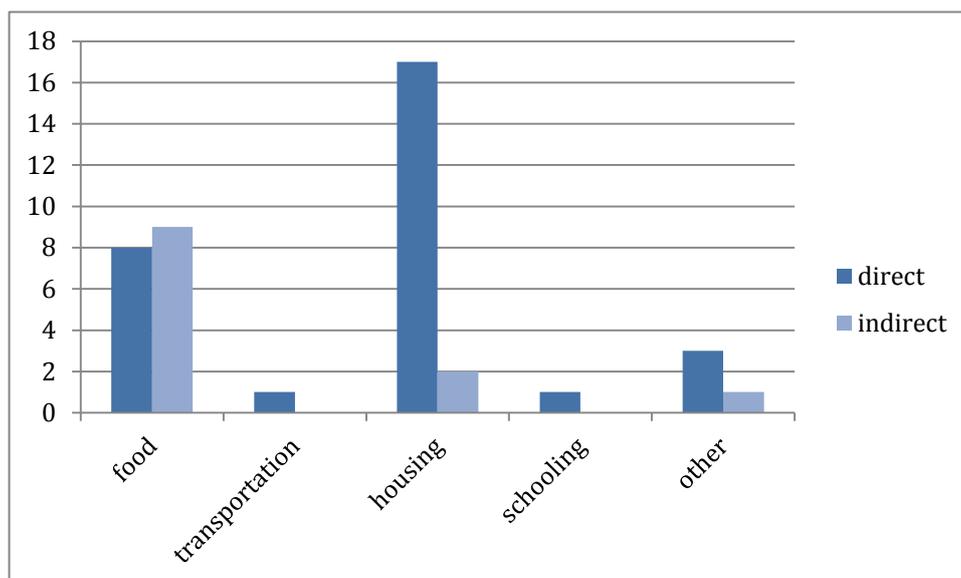
Material constraints reduce this “solidarity”, this “mutual dependence”, or this “reciprocal altruism” to a pragmatic trading system. There cannot be a donation without a counter-donation. People help someone from whom they expect to receive something in return. It is clearly understood that those who incur a debt (in the form of a loan, favour, service, etc.) must repay this in one way or another.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, most of our employees feel that they have a social role driven by the distinction of their economic position vis-à-vis the greater number – the “real poor”. Many emphasise their commitment to the church (youth worker, activities with orphans, contributions above the usual 10%).

54. *Ibid.*

A budget focused on basic expenses: food and housing

Employees' Main Item of Expenditure⁵⁵



Source: author's survey, Kinshasa, April 2016.

Our employees' main item of expenditure is mainly food or housing. Out of our sample, 33 employees are tenants, 10 are housed free of charge and 5 are owners (only direct employees). Becoming a home owner is considered as a key objective, as once this is achieved, it can release a significant share of disposable income for other considerations (savings, schooling fees, investments). The employees' total rent varies between \$50 and \$ 1,000 and impacts heavily on the lowest budgets.

Food is also the other major item of expenditure, especially for indirect employees. Dietary practices are marked by frugality. Meals are mainly eaten at home and are made up of staple foods: tea and bread or fufu⁵⁶ in the morning, fufu, rice, vegetables complemented rarely with meat or fish in the evening.

For lunch, many of them bring their food in (which may consist of two pieces of bread), or eat in the local *malewas* (makeshift restaurants). Interviewee 7, a direct employee whose monthly salary is close to \$1,000,

55. The question put to employees was: "What is your main source of expenditure?"

56. Fufu is a paste made from boiled and crushed flours.

explains: “I cannot risk taking my lunch to work. I take bread for lunch. In the evening, I eat at home.” The employees interviewed scarcely use the services offered by their companies: take-away meals delivered directly to the office ordered by a mobile money account.



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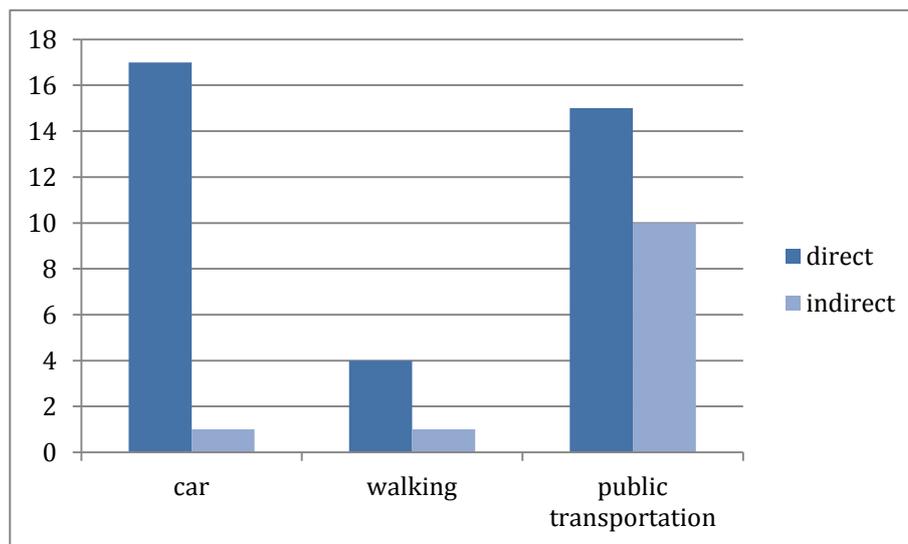
Staple foods are purchased at markets. Supermarkets are also frequented, occasionally but regularly, by the majority of employees. They are privileged places to buy fresh foods, such as dairy products or even delicatessen products, whose storage conditions on the markets are deemed questionable. Supermarkets are also for some, especially the youngest, “pleasure” shopping places. So, interviewee 11 states: “I sometimes go to the supermarket. I really like sweets and stuff like that.” Interviewee 20 likes, “to snack on supermarket stuff, like sandwiches”. For him, the supermarket is also symbolic of the lifestyle he aspires to: “I really like the supermarkets. I aspire to a certain lifestyle.”

Food and transport: rotating tactics

“I eat twice a day, morning and evening, otherwise you cannot, you finish all your money. To avoid the traffic jams, I arrive at 7.00 in the morning, and then have tea with my colleagues, tea and bread. Then in the evening at home, I eat fufu, rice, beans, and sometimes fish.” Interviewee 9, indirect employee (\$450), 30 years old.

“A middle-class person has a car and fuel. Those who are upper middle class can go on holiday. The very rich are those who travel back and forth between here and abroad. The poor leave once and for all.” Interviewee 20, indirect employee, 27 years old.

Employees' Main Means of Transport



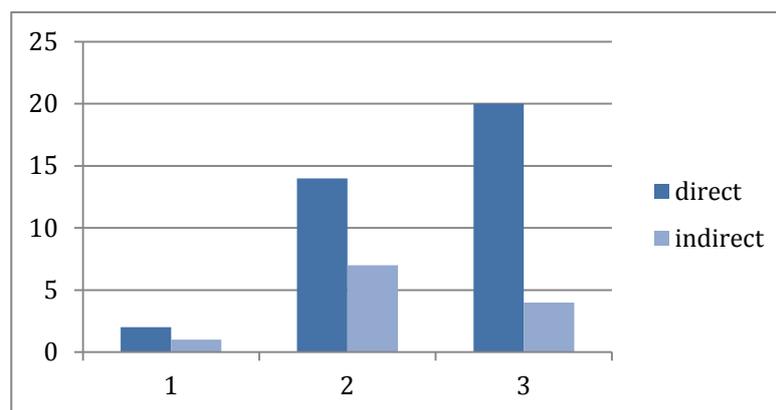
Source: author's survey, Kinshasa, April 2016.

The interviewees live in districts far from their workplace – rents nearby are unaffordable for them.⁵⁷ The distance between home and the workplace, correlated to the constant traffic jams, makes the journey time long (2 hours on average and up to 4 hours of daily travel). Time spent in traffic jams, coupled with work days deemed too long, was the source of recurring irritation. To get around, almost half of direct employees have their own car, mainly purchased *via* a bank loan spread over two to five

57. For example, rents for apartments in Gombé, the business district where many companies' offices are located, are at unaffordable rates for our interviewees. The rent for a two-room apartment is \$2,000 per month.

years.⁵⁸ Many of them vary the ways they get around by alternatively using their vehicle and public transport to limit fuel expenses. For example, interviewee 14 (40 years old, direct employee, \$2,000) financed the purchase of his car by taking out a loan that he repays monthly equal to \$500 over three years. He states that he has used it very sparingly for the time being, as he cannot meet the repayment costs and the fuel expenses at the same time. Like many of his colleagues, he uses public transport. The latter has the advantage of reducing travel costs,⁵⁹ but using it is torturous: employees are forced to take at least three minibuses to reach their workplace. However, using public transport is already a sign of social prestige in Kinshasa society.⁶⁰ The fact that they have a relatively open field of possibilities (will I use my vehicle or public transport, public transport or walk?) is also a distinctive characteristic of the African “middle classes”: having an existing choice, although limited by budget constraints.

Number of Meals per Day



Source: author's survey, Kinshasa, April 2016.

Less typical of the African “middle classes”, rotating practices are also common with regard to meals. Eating twice a day is a widespread practice among indirect employees, but also significantly affects direct employees (14/36). This practice is considered as common, as being “customary”, driven by reasons of economy, or even a practice by default “as there is nothing affordable in the district”. Eating twice a day is already considered

58. The purchase of a small car (like a Yaris) costs about \$4,000, that of a medium-sized car \$15,000/20,000, and that of the largest (like a Toyota Prado) \$35,000/40,000.

59. The cost of a journey by public transport between the home and the interviewees' workplace varies between \$1,000 and 5,000 Congolese Francs (\$ 1 and 5).

60. “The cost of transport generally exceeds the average purchasing power, people are exhausted by covering long distances on foot, through approaches which often do not yield results.” T. Trefon (ed.), *Ordre et désordre à Kinshasa. Réponses populaires à la faillite de l'État*, op. cit., p. 17.

as a differentiation vis-à-vis the “rest of Kinshasans”, who often only eat once a day or every two days. If rotating practices are common among our employees, they are more a tactic (to save, or even “to stay slim” for some young women) than an absolute necessity (except for some indirect employees).

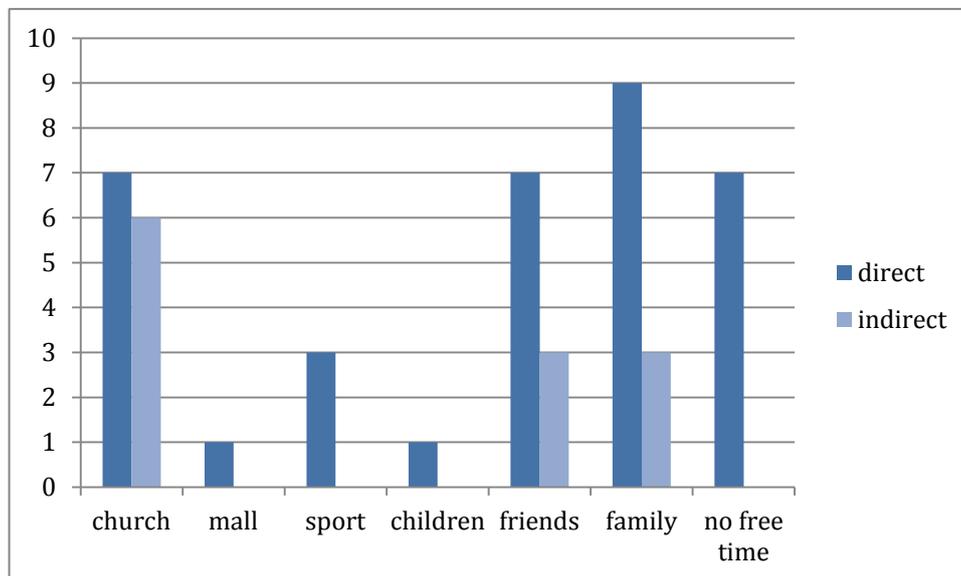
Entertainment?

“In life, you do not need to be too rich. You must be organised and avoid unnecessary extravagance. Some people increase their vehicles, rent in the posh districts, increase their gains and children, etc...; this is nonsense!” Interviewee 18, direct employee (\$3,000), 36 years old.

“In my spare time, I stay at home to avoid spending.” Interviewee 9, indirect employee (\$450), 30 years old.

“The first Saturday of each month I take my wife to the restaurant. I have just been paid and I can still brag.” Interviewee 14, direct employee (\$2,000), 40 years old.

Main Activity in their Spare Time



Source: author’s survey, Kinshasa, April 2016.

Religion has an important place for all the employees. Attending church is the main non-work-related activity for half of the indirect employees and for 7 direct employees. Most of the interviewees⁶¹ attend so-called “Revivalist” churches.⁶² Literature highlighted a correlation between the new Evangelical and Pentecostal churches and achievement of a middle-class social position, particularly *via* a dogma that values personal success and networks enabling it.⁶³ These churches are not however the preserve of the middle classes. There are no statistics, but studies have shown that they are also largely attended by Kinshasans in particularly precarious economic situations, and are “at the heart of survival strategies”.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, they occupy an important place in the lives of our employees, who invest significantly in parochial life.



© Clélie Nallet, RDC, Kinshasa, April 2016.

With a few exceptions, it is very rare for employees to attend outside of opening hours. Most non-work-related activities take place in the home, with friends,⁶⁵ or family members. “Going to each other’s” allows time to be

61. Apart from six Catholics and one Moslem.

62. The Revivalist churches bring a variety of Evangelical Christian churches and education institutions together.

63. C. Mayrargue, “Trajectoires et enjeux contemporains du pentecôtisme en Afrique de l’Ouest”, *Critique internationale*, Vol. 1, No. 22, 2004, p. 95-109.

64. J. Ballet, C. Dumbi and B. Lallau, “Enfants sorciers à Kinshasa (RD Congo) et développement des Églises du réveil”, *Mondes en développement*, Vol. 2, No. 146, 2009, p. 47-58.

65. The friends visited are generally childhood friends, originally from the same Kinshasan district or even from the same region for those (the minority) who have not grown up in Kinshasa. Relationships with friends met during the studies are also important.

spent together, while “avoiding pointless spending”. The employees and their family, are often well equipped and online, and also spend significant time on their smartphone, tablet or computer.⁶⁶

The non-work-related activities of our employees are therefore not extravagant. Half of direct employees state that they always give themselves some regular “extras”. It can be restaurant visits once a month on payday, or for occasions such as birthdays, or going to gyms or shopping centres. The latter offer various activities and are often chosen for family visits: “On Sundays we go to the supermarket. We eat a *shawarma*. We go to those where there are games for the children.” (Interviewee 4). The higher the employees’ income, the more varied are the activities, as shown by interviewee 33’s weekend programme (inset). Some regularly leave Kinshasa with their children and go “out to the country” and visit “tourist attractions”.

Interviewee 34’s family activities, direct employee (\$2,650)

“In my spare time, I sleep a lot, because I work too much. At 7 o’clock on Saturday mornings, I will go for a run or a walk. Afterwards, I eat and go back to sleep. When I wake up, I watch the TV if I don’t go out with the children. But sometimes, I go out with my daughter and we will relax a bit by going to the play area at Planet J/Gombe⁶⁷ or else going to eat ‘taba’.⁶⁸ The children will play in the swimming pool, next to the Collège Boboto. Both girls have a tablet that they use so as to not damage my smartphone.”

Getting involved?

“It’s beautiful on the outside, while on the inside it’s rotten. It’s useless wanting to match France, we must take care of domestic issues, have a sense of patriotism. There is theft, embezzlement, and investments are misappropriated.” Interviewee 11, direct employee (\$776), 45 years old.

“There are far too many injustices in this country and the leaders must be aware of them. Especially with youngsters and the job market. It is saturated.” Interviewee 23, indirect employee (\$500), 37 years old.

66. They all have a smartphone and the majority of direct employees have a computer or a tablet at least.

67. Children’s play area.

68. Goat meat.

“I am not satisfied with the government. They are not competent. There is no meritocracy. We will be able to make choices when we have real political programmes. I don’t know if there will be a government which could be credible.”
Interviewee 24, indirect employee (\$250), 31 years old.

Most of the employees interviewed follow their country’s political situation with interest. Family histories are often marked by conflicts and imprisonment and many think that, in any event, “if you are not interested in politics, it will become interested in you”.

The large majority of employees are not satisfied with the current government’s policy. It is the extreme poverty and inequalities which are most virulently condemned, as well as unemployment, particularly that of young people. The abdication of public authority translated by a lack of basic public services (healthcare, education, and electricity) is also a source of anger. The government’s slogan “Revolution of modernity”, is seen as a travesty, described as “nonsense” or even as a “slogan to flatter the weak-minded”.

The employees share the belief that political will and the appropriate public policies could significantly improve the situation in the country: “Yes, the government has an enormous influence on Kinshasans’ standard of living and on work. If it could take an interest in the lives of all Congolese, the pay inequities or social injustices would be reduced.” (Interviewee 35) On the other hand, they are not optimistic about the likelihood of such a change occurring in the future. The majority of employees do not see a credible alternative in the Congolese political scene.

Interviewee 37 states: “It’s difficult voting for someone lacking conviction.” Two-thirds of them⁶⁹ nevertheless intend to vote for an opposition party in the next presidential elections – an event they highly doubt will happen.⁷⁰

69. The others did not want to make a decision on this issue, or are intending to abstain due to the lack of a credible candidate.

70. The presidential elections were to have taken place in November 2016, the date of the end of Joseph Kabila’s second term – who cannot run for another term. At the time of the survey (April 2016), given the political situation and the state of non-progress in the organisation of the elections, the interviewees were sceptical about their actual organisation. This has furthermore been the case.

Conclusion

The telecommunication sector produces diversified salary situations. Employees' socio-economic situations vary greatly depending on the pay levels and especially the type of employment contract entered into. It would be a mistake to speak of a homogeneous social group. Nevertheless, significant trends and social dynamics are emerging.

Indirect employees are tending to move away from extreme poverty, while largely remaining in precarious positions. Their economic practices are focused on managing their everyday needs and their ability to plan is limited. The future of their economic situation is uncertain and depends on the situation (particularly those related to the employer.)

The direct employees are clearly in the local intermediate social space. They have emerged from the obsession of satisfying everyday needs and have a more or less substantial discretionary income which enables them to diversify their economic practices. Saving and investment – seen as a means to gradually move up the social ladder – are their first objective.

They share the main characteristics of the “African middle classes”: concentration on a small nuclear family, importance placed on education, controlled economic practices, composite consumption practices, and ambitions of social mobility. However, the study shows a key specific character – their detachment vis-à-vis the informal sector. Indeed, one of the typical characteristics of the middle classes is to juggle between the formal and informal sectors in order to diversify/accrue funds. In concrete terms, this translates into the combination of professional activities in both sectors, and in a widespread use of informal financial systems (“tontine type”) in order to save and invest. Few of our employees combine activities and their economic practices are definitely part of a banked and formalised system. In this case study, a formalisation dynamic is at work.

In a Kinshasan economy, largely dominated by the informal sector, wage labour is a stepping stone to middle-class social positions. While the correlation between wage labour and the middle classes is not systematic, the formalisation dynamic is actually accompanied by social mobility trajectories and improvements in standards of living (to varying degrees). These trajectories show the social dynamics in the making. The employees evolve in an intermediate social space which they self-identify and in which practices have tended to homogenise. In this, they form a potential class and their capacity to mobilise as a social group is uncertain at this time.

