The Poor and Middle Classes: who are they?

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When I finished my research on the global poverty discourse, some twenty years ago, one of my conclusions was that the inevitable victims of the new neoliberal social paradigm would be the middle classes. This is why I have always preferred to focus on the importance of universal social protection instead of targeted poverty reduction.  
  
It was not a popular position. Most of my friends replied that middle classes in fact did not exist and if they existed, that it was impossible to clearly identify them. Furthermore, poverty was such an inadmissible and unbearable phenomenon that yes, the priority has to be to alleviate it.  
  
Since then, researchers such as Branco Milanovic have shown that indeed middle classes were the major victims of globalisation, see the famous elephant curve. And these same middle classes are now central to much research.  
  
There is indeed a problem in clearly identifying middle classes. Where are the (income?) limits of their definition? At what level do you shift from poor to middle class and from middle class to rich?  
While this problem can be acknowledged, it remains strange to see that no such questions are ever put concerning the poor. As if we all knew who they are and when they are poor… as if it were a stable and homogeneous group.  
  
It is thirty years ago now the World Bank put poverty reduction as its first priority. It did not have any statistics about world poverty then, but started to produce them and to measure the ‘really existing poverty’. Back in the early 1990s, ‘extreme poverty’ stood for an income of 1 $ a day, in purchase power parity, whereas ‘poverty’ was defined as an income of less than 2 $ a day. Since then, the distinction between both types of poverty has almost been forgotten and the poverty line is put at 1.9 $ a day. According to the World Bank, less than 10 % of the world population is now poor, or around 750 million people.  
  
However, with every 10 cents added to the poverty line, around 100 million people are added, according to Andy Summers. The poverty line itself is often questioned, and many think it should be around 2,1 $ a day, which would bring the total number of poor to 950 million people.  
  
There are many more questions and doubts. Sticking to the official numbers and poverty lines, there are more people with chronic undernourishment (around 815 million, according to the FAO) than there are under the poverty line! And trying to measure multidimensional poverty will give a result that is twice as high! If you take a poverty line of around 10 $ a day, which, according to many statisticians is the level to really escape poverty – and adhere to the middle class – the number of poor reaches 4,5 billion, or more than half the world population.  
  
Researchers have often, and for a very long time, criticized the poverty of poverty statistics. It is far from easy to have correct numbers, and one can even wonder if these statistics can help in any way to reduce poverty.  
  
But two things should be very clear: first, **there is no reason to think it is harder to measure the middle classes and find a compromise on how to do this, than it is for poor people**. And secondly, as has been shown recently by Stephen Kidd, targeting the poor is extremely difficult and in most examined projects, the exclusion rate was far above 50 %. In other words: whether people are poor, middle income or wealthy, **we need universal social policies**, based on solidarity. This is the only guarantee to ‘leave no one behind’.