
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Impact of the Street-Stall Economy on the Quality of Employment in the Informal Economy

Yifan Lu

Faculty of Economics, Beijing Technology and Business University, Beijing 100080, China

Corresponding Author: Yifan Lu, **E-mail:** 1774950741@qq.com

| ABSTRACT

As a form of informal economy, the street-stall economy has a positive role in providing employment opportunities, but at the same time, there are problems such as low quality of employment and insufficient social security. Therefore, the question explored in this paper is whether the quality of informal economy employment generated by the ground stall economy is an effective job and whether it can be a way for low-income groups to earn a living. In this paper, the composition and proportion of the intangible costs of the stall economy and the average monthly income of the urban low-income group are analyzed to determine whether the informal jobs created by the stall economy can meet the basic needs of the urban low-income group. Taking the average per capital income of the low-income group as the standard, if the stall economy can steadily bring more than the standard net income to the low-income group, it means that the informal jobs created by the stall economy are effective jobs. The study shows that nearly 30% of the vendors in the statistics of the monthly net income of the street-stall economy are unable to reach the average income of the low-income group in the city, indicating that the informal economy jobs created by the street-stall economy are of low quality and are not enough to satisfy the basic living needs of the lowest-income group and that the proportion of effective jobs is low.

| KEYWORDS

The street-stall economy, informal economy, quality of employment, low-income people, social security

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Literature Review

In the environment of a national economic downturn, small-scale consumption with a low threshold, low cost and high mobility of the stall economy has gradually become the first choice of modern people, generating a huge employment population while promoting consumption and assuming the function of "social lubricant" (Zhang, 2010). However, there is a relative lack of research on the impact of the stall economy on the quality of employment in the informal economy. For example, Song (2022) conducted an in-depth analysis of the current situation and prospects of the development of the street vendor economy, but their main focus is on the economic benefits of the street vendor economy, and there is a lack of adequate assessment of the quality of employment in the informal economy. In addition, Liu (2021) studied the current situation and characteristics of informal economy employment but did not provide a detailed quantitative analysis of job quality. Against this background, the aim of this paper is to reveal the actual impact of the ground-trash economy on the quality of informal economy employment by assessing the monthly expenditures of low-income people in China and comparing them with the maximum income that can be guaranteed by the ground-trash economy.

1.2 Research Objectives and Innovations

This paper provides a comprehensive assessment of the quality of informal economy employment by introducing seven evaluation criteria and corresponding calculation functions. These criteria include wage level, job stability, social security, working environment, career development, working hours, and job satisfaction. In particular, the paper assesses the monthly expenditures of low-income people in China and compares them with the maximum income that can be guaranteed by the ground stall economy. It is found that the maximum monthly income that can be guaranteed by the ground floor economy cannot sustain the normal expenses of low-income people in China, and therefore, the informal jobs created by the ground floor economy are of low quality and cannot solve people's employment problems.

The innovation of this paper is that we not only propose a comprehensive job quality evaluation system but also conduct an empirical analysis through a data-based approach to reveal more accurately the actual impact of the stall economy on the quality of employment in the informal economy and conclude that the informal jobs created by the stall economy are of low quality and cannot solve people's employment problems.

2. Assumptions and Rationale

In the Assumptions and rationale section, we present the three hypotheses of the study, aiming to explore quantifiable ways in which the vendor economy can satisfy the livelihood needs of low-income people and the quality of employment in the informal economy in the current economic situation.

Hypothesis 1: Low-income group defined as urban households with annual household incomes below the minimum income line

We surveyed urban households in which the combined income of household members remained below the "low-income line" based on income thresholds as a response to whether the quality of informal employment generated by the street vendor economy met basic living needs.

The low-income line is 60% of the national per capital disposable income, so that if the national per capita disposable income in 2022 is \$40,000/year, for example, the national average low-income line will be \$24,000/year or \$2,000/month. Meanwhile, we set the cost of living standard at RMB 15,000/year or RMB 1,250/month. Taking into account geographical differences, the low-income line may be adjusted to RMB 30,000/year or RMB 2,500/month for Tier 1 cities, RMB 26,000/year or RMB 2,167/month for Tier 2 cities, and RMB 22,000/year or RMB 1,833/month for Tier 3 cities and below. Based on these criteria, we take as a target group those households in cities where the sum of the incomes of the household members is still below the minimum income line as a response to whether the quality of informal economy employment formed by the ground floor economy meets the basic needs of life.

Hypothesis 2: Informal economy employment formed by The street-stall economy can meet the normal livelihood needs of low-income people.

Normal living needs are defined by a combination of the following factors: Engel's coefficient of no more than 40%, ownership of a stable dwelling of no less than 70%, education expenditure of no less than 15% of total expenditure, as well as expenditure of no less than 20% on daily necessities and services, and a level of indebtedness in the economic situation of no more than 40% of total savings. The street-stall economy provides employment opportunities for low-income people. The rise of the street stall economy has enabled low-income earners to set up street stalls and sell a variety of goods and services. This not only helps them to become self-reliant but also enables them to improve their living conditions in the short term.

Hypothesis 3: The quality of employment in the informal economy can be quantified through calculations.

Due to the current lack of regulation and statistics on employment in the informal economy, accurate data are not available for many of its indicators. In the text, we assume that these data are valid and visualized. To enhance the feasibility and evidence support of this assumption, we can introduce the following specific quantitative indicators: describing the average income level of informal economy jobs not less than 2,000 RMB, measuring the stability of informal economy jobs (e.g., the duration of the job is not shorter than 6 months), the stability of income (e.g., the coefficient of fluctuation of the monthly income is not higher than 0.2), and the statistics on the access of people employed in the informal economy to social security (the rate of access to social security should not be less than 50%). Considering the limitations of the existing data collection and analysis methods, it is recommended that more accurate data be collected through questionnaires and in-depth interviews to support the quantitative assessment of the quality of jobs in the informal economy.

3. Visualization of the Quality of Jobs

The term “informal economy employment” originated with the International Labor Organization (ILO). As early as the 1960s, Keith Hart, an anthropologist of the International Labor Organization (ILO), found in Ghana that it was difficult for low-income earners to find jobs in import-substituting industries or in the public sector of the government and that they were therefore mainly engaged in low-wage jobs or self-employment (Chen et al., 2021).

According to estimates based on data from multiple sources, informal employment in China's cities and towns accounts for 33.2 to 44.7 per cent of total employment in cities and towns, with the number of employed persons amounting to 138 to 155 million, with the hidden part of the employment being the mainstay. In terms of spatial distribution, it is characterized by a gradual decline in the eastern, central and western parts of the country; in terms of the type of employment, it is predominantly the hired type of employment, which is engaged in various types of informal work.

3.1 Definition of Quality of Employment

There is a close link between decent employment and the quality of employment, and it can be argued that decent employment is high-quality employment and that the dimensions of the quality of employment can be identified in terms of each of the aspects emphasized in decent employment. Thus, in addition to income, working hours and intensity of work, safety and health, well-being, social dialogue, technological development and career prospects, which often attract attention, the quality of employment should include the four dimensions of ease of access to job opportunities, workers' participation in matters that concern them, their position in industrial relations and whether their personal dignity is respected.

3.2 Measurement of the Quality of Employment

The quality of employment should be comprehensively examined and measured from the following seven perspectives: (i) Job availability: that is, how easy or difficult it is to find a job. (ii) Working conditions: including wages, labor hours and labor intensity. (iii) Safety and health: including job stability and workplace safety. Workplace safety includes injuries to workers due to negligence of production safety and intentional, direct physical and mental injuries. (iv) Rights and Dignity: i.e., whether they are respected by employers, coworkers and people around them in their work and life, and whether their legitimate rights and interests can be safeguarded; (v) Welfare and Security: i.e., whether they are able to enjoy various benefits and social security. (vi) Training and career prospects: whether skills training and appropriate promotion are available in a timely manner and whether there are possibilities for career development. (vii) Employment status: whether employers and employees can negotiate on an equal footing, whether workers have channels to express their views and whether they can participate in decision-making on issues of concern to them. These seven aspects basically reflect the quality of employment of workers in a more comprehensive manner. However, these are only perspectives for measuring the quality of employment, and in making specific measurements, it is necessary to utilize certain indicators and systems of indicators to measure the specific performance of each of these aspects and the comprehensive measurement of the quality of employment.

3.3 Quality of Employment in the Informal Economy

Job quality index. Income, labor hours and labor intensity are the three most basic aspects of a job and should therefore be the most important and fundamental subjects to be examined in the quality of employment.

Employment stability index. Whether a person's job is stable and whether he or she is able to keep it for a relatively long period of time according to his or her wishes is likewise an indication of the quality of employment.

$$S = L_1/L$$

Where.S = degree of stability of employment

L_1 = Duration of the longest held job in one's career to date

L= length of participation

S The bigger it is, the more stable someone's job is.

This approach excludes the impact of individuals voluntarily quitting early in their careers as they search for a suitable job.

Employment status index. The Employment Status Index measures the relative positions of the two employing parties in industrial relations and collective bargaining, as well as the likelihood of workers' participation in social dialogue and organizational decision-making.

Career development index. A measure of the training, learning and career development of workers, which can be measured by the proportion of workers participating in formal or informal technical training as a %age of the total, as well as the number and duration of training and opportunities for advancement.

Welfare and security index. Access to the benefits and guarantees that companies are required to provide is also an important dimension of the quality of employment, which is related to the ability of workers to withstand risks and can be measured by the proportion of workers who have access to various benefits and insurance as a %age of the total.

Health and safety indicators. The ability to work in a safe environment is a very important aspect of the quality of employment. A safe working environment has three meanings: firstly, there are no toxic substances or factors harmful to the human body in the working environment, and there are no adverse effects on the body of the worker.

With regard to the seven indicators mentioned above, since the quality of work includes both income and labor intensity, and since the accessibility of employment for those employed in the informal economy is quite specific, this item is no longer taken into account in the specific measurements and metrics, and the income and labor intensity of the quality of work is calculated separately. In this way, there are still seven perspectives to examine. Since the examination of each item can be expressed as a relative index, and since the seven indices mentioned above can be calculated as an average index reflecting the average level of a certain group, it is possible to use this average index as the basis for determining the weights of the various indices according to the degree of importance attached to the above-mentioned issues. In this way, an index of employment quality can be calculated, thus reflecting in general terms the quality of his or her employment. This is expressed by the following formula.

$$EQI = \sum_{i=1}^7 X_i W_i$$

Here, EQI indicates the quality of employment.

X_i Indicates the average indicator for each of the above 7 items, $i=1,2,3,4,5,6,7$

W_i weighting

$$\sum_{i=1}^7 W_i = 1$$

The preceding description of the characteristics of those employed in the informal economy suggests that the majority of those employed in the informal economy have low levels of skills, that capital investment in the informal sector is low, and that the severity of the employment problem in developing countries has brought about high levels of competition in the informal labor market. At the same time, social security systems in developing countries are generally inadequate, resulting in higher rates of labor market participation. Not only that, but more importantly, a significant part of the informal sector is not registered with the relevant State authorities, and its behavior is sometimes difficult to be controlled and supervised by the corresponding State authorities; all of this determines to a considerable extent the low quality of employment of those employed in the informal economy.

4. Definition of Urban Low-income Groups

In this section, we provide a specific definition of the urban low-income group as a measure of the size of the group that may be able to improve their lives through informal employment. For this measure, we introduce the definition of the "low income line", i.e., the urban population whose combined household income is still below 60% of the national per capita disposable income. Those below the low-income line are likely to be able to address basic poverty through the large-scale development of informal employment and to secure a quality of life. We need to know the size and distribution of this group so that local policies and development of the ground economy can match the size of its population.

4.1 Income and Expenditure of Urban Residents

On January 17, 2023, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) released data showing that the per capital disposable income of national residents in 2022 was RMB 36,883, an increase of 5.0% over the previous year, and a real increase of 2.9% after deducting the price factor. In terms of urban and rural areas, the disposable income per capital of urban residents was RMB 49,283, an increase of 3.9%, or 1.9% in real terms after deducting the price factor; the disposable income per capita of rural residents was RMB 20,133, an increase of 6.3%, or 4.2% in real terms after deducting the price factor.

4.2 Proportion of Urban Low-income Groups and Measurement Criteria

The per capita income of the low-income group of urban residents is 16,746 yuan/year, which translates into a monthly income of less than 1,400 yuan. For a family of three, that's about 5,000 yuan/month. This income is basically enough to feed a family in a small city, but in a slightly larger city, life would be a bit tight.

Table 1 Main data on income and expenditure of urban and rural residents in 2023

norm	Absolute amount (dollars)	Nominal growth over previous year (%)
(i) Per capita disposable income of urban residents	51821	5.1
By source of income:		
wage income	31321	5.9
Net operating income	5903	5.7
Net property income	5392	2.9
Net transfer income	9205	3.6
(ii) Consumption expenditure per urban resident	32994	8.6
By consumption category:		
food, tobacco and alcohol	9495	6.0
clothes	1880	8.4
live in a place	7822	2.3
Household goods and services	1910	6.1
transport communications	4495	15.0
Education, Culture and Entertainment	3589	17.7
health care	2850	14.9
Other supplies and services	953	17.1

Table 2 Data on annual per capita income of urban residents in China by quintile group, etc.

particular year	Urban 20% lower middle income group (units)	Urban 20% Low Income Groups (nos.)	Low-income group as a %age of national income
2023	30133	16746	6.7%
2022	27501	15598	6.7%
2021	26784	15549	6.9%
2020	24857	14387	6.9%
2019	24550	13723	7.1%
2018	23055	13004	7.2%
2017	21446	72237	7.3%
2016	79657	77219	7.2%
2015	17628	9896	7.0%

It can be seen that the proportion of low-income groups in the city is still around 7%, and their monthly disposable income does not reach 1400 yuan, according to the text; if the ground stall economy can be stabilized to low-income groups to bring more than 1400 yuan per month net revenue, then it shows that the quality of life in the informal economy employment can meet the basic needs of life, the ground stall economy to create jobs in the informal economy, that is, the validity of the informal economy jobs.

5. Evaluating Job Quality in the Street-Stall Economy

As an important part of China's informal economy, the street-stall economy is of some importance in promoting employment and economic growth. However, the employment quality, income level, and related intangible costs of this economic form deserve in-depth study and analysis. In this section, we will start with the importance of the impact of the ground stall economy on the quality of employment and analyze the current state of development of its industry, the composition and proportion of intangible costs, as well as the characteristics of the vendors and their monthly net incomes one by one, with a view to comprehensively evaluating the situation of effective jobs in the ground stall economy.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), in 2023, there will be 217 million employed persons in China's urban non-private sector, 386 million employed persons in the urban private sector, and 204 million urban individually owned businesses, of which about 120 million will be engaged in the ground-floor economy, accounting for 58.8 percent of urban individually owned businesses.

According to CJP, the market size of China's ground floor economy will be about 3.6 trillion yuan in 2023, accounting for 23.4% of GDP and growing 8.7% year-on-year. Among them, the market size of the food and beverage street-stall economy will be

approximately 1.2 trillion yuan, accounting for 33.3% of the street-stall economy and growing 9.2% year-on-year; the market size of the apparel street-stall economy will be approximately 0.9 trillion yuan, accounting for 25% of the street-stall economy and growing 8.5% year-on-year; the market size of the daily necessities street-stall economy will be approximately 0.6 trillion yuan, accounting for 16.7% of the street-stall economy and growing 8.1% year-on-year; and the market size of the other The market size of the ground floor economy in the category of daily necessities was about 0.9 trillion yuan, accounting for 25% of the ground floor economy and an increase of 8.3% year-on-year.

5.1 Current Status of Development of the Ground Economy Industry

Individual business households are the most numerous of China's market entities, 90% of which are concentrated in the service industry, with wholesale and retail, accommodation and catering, and residential services as the main modes of operation. According to the survey, the average number of people employed by individually owned businesses is 2.68, which means that the nation's individually owned businesses have solved the employment problems of 276 million people in China.

As of May 21, 2022, the 36,000 stalls in Chengdu have created more than 100,000 jobs. Conservative estimates suggest that 500,000 stalls are expected to be opened up if other cities across the country pursue the policy in an orderly manner, and it is expected that 1-1.5 million new jobs will be created (Chen et al., 2021).

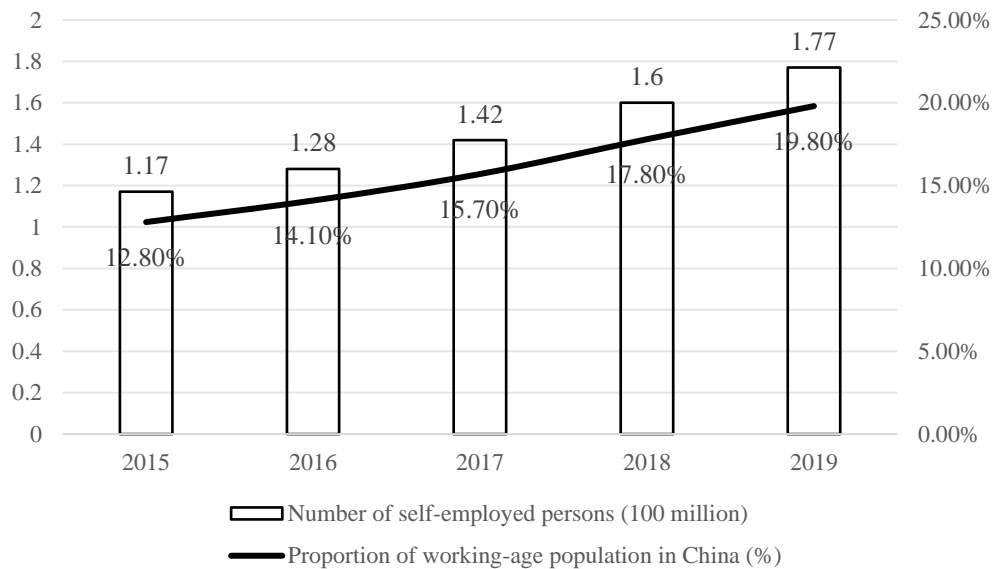


Figure 1. The scale of self-employed people in China from 2015 to 2019 (unit: 100 million people, %)

Data from the statistics of the Prospective Industry Research Institute show that in 2019, the combined number of self-employed people in towns and villages in China amounted to 177 million, accounting for nearly 20% of China's working-age population; and the total business volume of China's self-employed households for the whole year amounted to 13.1 trillion, equivalent to 32% of the country's total social retail sales. From this, we can see the prosperity of street stalls and small stores.

It is worth noting that in the midst of the epidemic, in February, self-employment turnover nationwide fell to 50 % of its expected value; by March 2020, it had recovered by 80 % in most parts of the country; and by the end of May, 12 million small stores and roadside stalls across the country had realized year-on-year increases in revenue. As an integral part of self-employment, the importance of ground stalls and small stores to employment is evident.

5.2 Components and Proportions of Intangible Costs in the Ground Economy

While the ground floor economy provides low-cost opportunities for entrepreneurs, it also faces a number of intangible costs and challenges compared to formal employment. In particular, the intangible costs of the ground floor economy are more complex and numerous, as it is characterized by the lack of fixed business locations and formal business licences, over-reliance on government policies and the market environment, a completely temporary nature, the absence of fixed workplaces and social security, and a low threshold of entry.

As a form of informal economy, the intangible costs of the ground stall economy mainly include: legal risks, unstable business environment, lack of long-term development opportunities, lack of protection and welfare, and high pressure of market

competition. Stall owners need to take these factors fully into account in the course of their operations and formulate reasonable business strategies to reduce intangible costs and improve operational efficiency and market competitiveness.

Through surveys and statistics, practitioners of the ground stall economy face the risk of being penalized or cleared by urban management, according to "CIC: Analysis of China's Ground Stall Economy Data" (CIC, 2020), in the Beijing Municipality's action to clean up unlicensed hawkers in 2019, law enforcement authorities conducted nearly 100,000 administrative enforcement actions nationwide due to the management of the ground stall economy, with more than 20,000 ground stalls cleared, and penalties imposed nationwide due to unlicensed vendors. More than 20,000 stalls were cleaned up, and nationwide penalties for unlicensed hawkers amounted to more than 500 million yuan.

The irregular policy adjustments have also led to three large-scale policy adjustments in 2018-2020 alone. For example, in 2018, some cities closed nearly 20% of ground stalls due to market adjustments; in 2019, more than 100,000 ground stalls were forced to shut down nationwide as a result of cleanup operations by city administrations, and during the 2020 epidemic, several cities imposed restrictions on the ground stall economy, with nearly 80% of ground stall operators reporting impacts.

According to Qianzhan (2020), more than 60% of ground floor stall operators use it as a short-term livelihood, and the reality illustrates the unity and inevitability of their choices, with more than 50% choosing to stop their operations within a year due to the lack of a long-term stable market outlook, instead of a long-term career. Among those with long-term careers, more than 70% of ground stall operators also reported a lack of stable income and social security, especially the unmet need to ensure basic personal health, such as medical insurance, according to People's Daily (Chen et al., 2022), less than 20% of ground stall operators have purchased commercial insurance, and the majority of vendors do not have medical insurance. This indicates that their development opportunities and specific guarantees are limited.

5.3 Characteristics of Vendors and Net Monthly Income

Informal employment is not regulated by labor laws and is characterized by the commodification of labor in the accumulation of labor deprivation, the informal practices of local governments (Fraser, 2017), and the "planned informality" that has been a key driver of China's high GDP growth rate, which refers to the government's efforts to attract domestic and foreign investment with the help of a cheap informal labor force. Informal employment does have some positive effects, which can be seen in the fact that informal employment solves a large amount of surplus labor, creates high economic benefits with low job costs, and migrant workers employed in the informal economy provide a variety of services to urban residents, so the overall contribution of informal employment in national economic growth should not be ignored (Tang, 2002).

However, for workers in the informal economy who do not have adequate protection for their rights and interests, their labor status is not protected, social benefits are not covered, and their rights and interests are not enforced on an individual basis.

The education level of professional vendors is generally low. According to the survey, the educational level of low-carbon itinerant and stationary vendors is 75% with less than a junior high school education, 20% with a senior high school education, and 5% with university education. According to the characteristics, it can be found that professional vendors are usually people with low education levels.

The upfront cost of a vendor's stall is high. Although the threshold of the stall economy is low and the cost of purchasing goods is low, the intangible upfront cost is far more than that of formal economic job holders. Among the vendors, those who work seven days a week account for 82%, and the rest belong to the sporadic type of stalls on weekends and holidays. 70% of the professional vendors work at least 12 hours a day, mostly starting their stalls around 12 noon and closing them around 12 p.m. The majority of the vendors work at least 12 hours a day, and the majority of them do not necessarily stay in one place. Twenty-six % do not necessarily stay in one place every day, going wherever there are more people, and 74 % choose to set up stalls at fixed locations during a certain period of time.

Nearly 30% of the monthly net income of vendors is lower than the average monthly income of urban low-income groups. The survey showed that 27% of the vendors had a monthly net income of less than RMB 1,000; 41% of the vendors had a monthly net income of between RMB 1,000 and RMB 2,000; and 32% of the vendors had a monthly net income of more than RMB 2,000.

Most of the vendors are migrant workers with no local welfare protection. Of all the surveyed vendors, 98% were outsiders, and only 2% were locals.

The street-stall economy is huge, with employees accounting for 58.8 per cent of urban self-employed business households. This shows that the street-stall economy has some capacity to provide employment opportunities for a large number of people in

China. However, there are problems in terms of the quality of employment, income levels and social security. High intangible costs and lower net incomes reduce the quality of life of vendors, especially for those with lower levels of education. Together, these factors have led to a relatively low quality of employment in the ground floor stall economy, making it difficult to meet the normal expenditure needs of low-income people. It is recommended that the government should formulate relevant policies to support the compliant and standardized development of the ground floor stall economy and improve the quality of employment and income level of stall vendors. At the same time, strengthening education and training for vendors to enhance their skills and competitiveness, as well as providing them with more social security and welfare benefits, will help to improve the overall effectiveness of the street-stall economy and better meet the needs of the community, with a view to realizing high-quality employment in the street-stall economy.

6. Conclusion

As a form of informal economy, the street vendor economy has a positive role to play in providing employment opportunities, promoting consumption and increasing the income of residents. However, the quality of informal employment generated by the stall economy still needs to be improved.

Through statistical analysis, this paper finds that today's street-stall economy can provide a certain source of income for urban low-income groups, but nearly 30% of the vendors are unable to reach the average income of urban low-income groups, which indicates that the quality of informal economy jobs is low, and the proportion of effective jobs is low. At the same time, the intangible costs of the street-stall economy are high, including the vendors' own human capital investment, market access costs and business risks, and these factors make the vendors bear the greater pressure of life with lower incomes. The relatively low level of social security makes it difficult for stall vendors to receive effective protection when they encounter risks such as illness and unemployment, and the value of their labor cannot be fully realized. Therefore, in the process of policy formulation, full consideration should be given to the characteristics of the stall economy, and targeted policies should be formulated to improve the quality of employment in the informal economy and promote the sustainable development of the stall economy.

In order to solve these problems, the threshold of market access should be lowered to provide a more convenient business environment for stall hawkers. Secondly, vocational training should be strengthened to enhance the employment skills of vendors and raise their income levels. In addition, the government should establish a sound social security system so that participants in the street vendor economy can receive timely protection in the event of risks.

In order to solve these problems, our Government should take full account of the characteristics of the street vendor economy in the process of policy formulation and formulate targeted policies. Firstly, it should lower the threshold of market access and provide a more convenient business environment for vendors; secondly, it should strengthen vocational training and improve the employment skills of vendors; and it should establish a sound social security system so that participants in the street vendor economy can receive timely protection when they encounter risks. At the same time, attention should be paid to the sustainable development of the stall economy, ensuring a clean urban environment, fully exploiting its development potential and stimulating market vitality.

In the course of implementing the policy, the Government also needs to pay attention to the sustainable development of the stall economy. On the one hand, it is necessary to ensure that the urban environment is clean and tidy so as to avoid the negative impact of the stall economy on the urban environment. On the other hand, the development potential of the stall economy should be fully tapped to stimulate market vitality and enable it to play a greater role in economic growth and job creation.

In conclusion, the ground stall economy has an important position in China's economic development, but the quality of employment in the informal economy still needs to be improved. The Government should take full account of the characteristics of the street-stall economy and formulate targeted policies to improve the quality of employment in the informal economy and promote the sustainable development of the street-stall economy. This will help to raise the income level of urban low-income groups, alleviate the gap between rich and poor in society and promote overall economic prosperity.

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