



# Bidirectional Drive and Multiple Empowerment: How It is Possible to Embed Mobile Vendors in Community Governance

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**Abstract.** In the context of increasingly downward social governance, how to reconcile the tension that exists between the inherent pluralistic needs of mobile vendor governance and the benefits of the current administratively-led policy implementation is one of the challenges facing efforts to realize energy-enhancing and efficiency-enhancing community governance. This paper mainly adopts the methodology of literature research, combined with practical empirical judgments, to develop a research turn towards the community as the subject and field of governance by analyzing the dilemmas faced by the existing mobile vendor governance practices in the Chinese Mainland. The study finds that the bidirectional drive of support from government departments and pushback from the social level creates external conditions for the real need for mobile vendors to be embedded in community governance, while the multiple empowerments of legitimacy, public space, and community information from within the community contributes to the realization of this shift, which offers the possibility of mobile vendors being embedded in the development of governance in the community, and provides a new reflection on the governance of mobile vendors in the contemporary era. This provides the possibility for mobile vendors to be embedded in the governance of community development and provides new thinking for contemporary mobile vendor governance.

**Keywords:** mobile vendors, community governance, bidirectional drive, multiple empowerment.

## 1 Introduction

The informal economy is relative to the formal economy, which first originated from the discussion of the informal sector and was systematically elaborated by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in the Kenya Report<sup>[1]</sup>. With the rapid urbanization in China, informal economic activities such as mobile vendors, motorcycle drivers, and scrap recycling have become a common means of livelihood for some low-income groups. Especially when faced with the social background of economic downturn and unstable employment situations such as the new crown epidemic, informal economic activities have accelerated their spread as an effective way to supplement household

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income and cope with unemployment and other situations. Currently, informal employment has become the main mode of urban employment and the main source of urban employment growth in China, and according to the estimates of existing studies, there are about 114 million urban informal workers in China<sup>[2]</sup>. Such a huge informal economic activity has an important impact on urban governance in China and has become an important issue in the field of grassroots governance. As a typical representative of the informal economy, mobile vendors' business activities continue to affect China's urban space and environment, providing a means of livelihood for the public and at the same time unavoidably affecting public order, and their endowed double-sidedness has attracted extensive attention from both the government and the academia. However, existing research in academia has mainly focused on the criticism of exclusionary policies, and although some scholars have already attempted to focus on positive planning responses based on different perspectives, in general, they still think in terms of administratively-led governance subjects. In contrast, the role of social agents in mobile vendor governance has not yet received sufficient attention.

Therefore, this paper focuses on the socio-economic issue of mobile vendors, analyses the dilemmas faced by the existing mobile vendor governance practices in Chinese Mainland, develops a research shift to take the community as the main body and field of governance, looks for more inclusive governance measures, and explore the possibility of embedding mobile vendors into the community governance, to provide useful reflections on urban informality governance.

## **2 The Dilemma Between the Inherent Need for Mobile Vendor Governance and The Reality of the Initiative**

On the one hand, the existence of mobile vendors effectively meets the market demand, provides low-income groups with low-threshold employment opportunities, and safeguards their livelihoods; however, on the other hand, the informal use of public space by mobile vendors increases the "gap space" within the community, which, to a certain extent, adversely affects the social order<sup>[3]</sup>. So, in the past ten years, governments all over the country have carried out different policy attempts to solve the problem of mobile vendors. Among the existing practices, the two main orientations presented are banning and fixed-point diversion. The former attempts to consolidate urban control by directly eliminating mobile vendors, although it can maintain stability within a certain jurisdiction for a short period, the frequent conflicts it triggers increase the difficulty of urban management in disguise, which is an uneconomical and unsustainable option. In contrast to banning, places such as Guangzhou have adopted the concept of "combining blocking and easing" to designate relief zones as resettlement areas for mobile vendors, turning mobility into stationarity and providing a more inclusive paradigm for the maintenance of the community environment and the activities of mobile vendors.

However, in the actual implementation of the work, the above-mentioned way of absorbing informal workers through the integration and linking role of the evacuation zones is not enough to fully solve the problem of mobile vendors. For example, since 2015, several evacuation zones in Guangzhou have faced the crisis of being revoked,

and mobile vendors have thus lost the legitimacy and membership of their business activities in the original evacuation zones, and the evacuation zone policy has entered a bottleneck<sup>[4]</sup>. From the external analysis, this predicament is due to the formalization element in the governance of the zones having dissolved the action advantages brought by the economic characteristics of the mobile vendors, which hurts the livelihood of the vendors<sup>[5]</sup>. However, the root of the problem is that the governance of mobile vendors is an extremely complex and sensitive spatial governance activity, which requires the coordination and balance of the interests of residents, vendors, communities, and grassroots government. As the main body of governance, mobile vendors lack the organizational power to negotiate with the government to oppose the policy, nor can they express their opinions in a formal way, which makes the current initiatives in the de-concentration zones more of an administratively driven practice of "formal localism"<sup>[6]</sup>.

This creates a circular paradox, whereby formalization, to support the informal economy, undermines the endowment of vendors and reduces trust in the policy, to the detriment of the long-term and orderly development of the informal economy<sup>[7]</sup>. If mobile vendors are allowed to develop freely, they may not be able to guarantee the survival order of the vendors internally, and externally, they may cause problems such as community environmental pollution and unregulated services<sup>[8]</sup>. In other words, there is a certain tension between the inherent pluralistic needs of informal economy governance and the effectiveness of the current administratively-led policy implementation, which is one of the challenges to achieving "appropriate formalization".

When faced with the difficulty of mediating such multiple interests and the bottleneck of government policy implementation aimed at the optimal allocation of social resources, research has found that the theory of governance and good governance can further optimize the cooperation between the government and citizens in the management of public life<sup>[9]</sup>. Some scholars take the "stall economy" as a starting point, and under the guidance of the rule of law, functionalism, and reconciliation, they have summarized three alternative strategies of good governance, namely commercialization, communityzation, and humanization<sup>[10]</sup>. Further thinking around these three strategies, both commercialization and humanization strategies put more emphasis on the role and scale played by grassroots governments and law enforcers of urban management in informal economy governance. However, mobile vendors, as a "grassroots group" with strong social attributes, lack social participation and legitimacy from the social level in the real situation, while containing the requirements of social subjects to participate in informal governance. Some scholars have attempted to organically combine service and governance from the perspective of social work, to enhance the expression of mobile vendors' demands on issues such as the selection of community transfer points<sup>[11]</sup>.

Nevertheless, in general, the main body of research on the governance of mobile vendors in the Chinese mainland is still mainly focused on vendors, consumers, city managers, and grassroots governments, and the research on the participation of social subjects in governance is seldom involved. Overseas, some scholars have found that some local governments, through a variety of policy incentives, have promoted vendors to form trade unions such as street vendors' associations to maintain stable and friendly organizational relationships with vendors, and to create a harmonious social environment<sup>[12]</sup>. Considering the actual situation and social structure in the Chinese Mainland,

the role played by trade union organizations in the governance of the informal economy has certain limitations. Comparatively speaking, the community, as the basic unit of mobile vendor activities, on the one hand, passively plays the role of a provider of public space and is an important subject of interest in informal economic activities. On the other hand, as grass-roots mass self-governance organizations, they have the intrinsic mission of maintaining law and order and mediating disputes and are more "grounded" in the actual process of participating in the governance of mobile vendors.

### **3 Embedding Mobile Vendors in the External Conditions of Community Governance: the Bidirectional Drive of the Government and Society**

In the past two decades, the central and local governments have made significant changes in their orientation towards grassroots governance, and community governance, as an integral part and important foundation of the modernization of the national grassroots governance system and governance capacity, has assumed more and more responsibility for governance, and it is in the context of the political environment and the social background that the external conditions for mobile vendors to be embedded in community governance have been created.

#### **3.1 The Political Environment in which Mobile Vendors are Embedded in Community Governance**

##### **3.1.1 From Government Management to Pluralistic Governance: Changes in the Orientation of Grassroots Governance**

The effective operation of grass-roots governance is based on certain political institutional arrangements, and the system of grass-roots governance in the Chinese Mainland has generally gone through a historical evolution of the unit system, the street system, and the community system. In the early governance process, more governmental management means were adopted, in which the government acted as the sole center and sought to achieve social management goals through a top-down administrative order approach. Since the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee put forward the idea of "promoting the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity", multi-governance has gradually taken the stage of history. From government management to pluralistic governance, it is the process of cooperation between pluralistic governance subjects in the management of social and public affairs to promote the maximization of public interests, which is the inevitable trend of change in the relationship between the government and society, reflecting the unity of the history and logic of the change in the relationship between the government and society<sup>[13]</sup>.

While urban mobile vendor governance is an important aspect of the grassroots governance system, the change of the national grassroots governance logic is likewise continuously shaping the development of the logic of mobile vendor governance. Analyzed based on this idea, in past practice, the grassroots governance model represented by

government management and the urban vendor governance model represented by administrative dominance both essentially follow the process of domination by a single power. The shift in grassroots governance from government management to pluralistic governance has provided a handhold and direction to break the current situation of unitary governance of mobile vendors, and to a certain extent has answered the question of "where to go from here" in mobile vendor governance.

### **3.1.2 From Spatial Exclusion to Spatial Inclusion: Policy Support for Mobile Vendors**

Government departments in the Chinese Mainland have experienced several shifts in their governance policies towards mobile vendors. Since the reform and opening up, mobile vendors have been able to proliferate rapidly due to the transformation of the social structure and the change of the economic system, which has released a large number of laborers from the former unitary system. Since the 1990s, economic and urban development has gradually become the primary goal of Chinese urban politics. At the same time, many cities in China have joined the movement to build NSC because of the favorable investment environment that can be created by the enhancement of the city's image, and mobile vendors face total exclusion as they are considered to be a sign of chaos and low-quality development that does not conform to the image of the NSCs. Over the past two decades, local governments have been relatively "ambiguous" in their treatment of mobile vendors, preferring to exclude them when the city's economic development is on the upswing or during specific periods, such as during "sanitation" campaigns, to create better spatial environments. In times of economic upturn or "healthcare", local governments are more inclined to exclude mobile vendors from creating a better spatial environment. In times of economic downturn, when mobile vendors are an important part of the city's economy, the government or city administration is more inclined to adopt a compromising and acquiescent approach.

To co-ordinate epidemic prevention and control and economic development, realize the public interest, and help the resumption of work and the resumption of the city, Chengdu City issued the "Measures for Five Allowances and One Adherence to Coordinating Epidemic Prevention and Control and Helping Economic Development in Chengdu City's Urban Management" in March 2020, and it became the first city at the municipal level to allow mobile vendors to temporarily occupy the roads and operate in the vicinity of the residential community. In past practice, the "Creating a Hygienic and Civilised City" stage of the selection process had a significant impact on mobile vendors, as the cityscape and citizens' behavior are the embodiment of the city's hard power in the evaluation system, so during this period, the city management department would often take stricter measures to regulate the mobile vendors, including fixed-point diversion and temporary banning, etc. In May 2020, the Central Civilisation Office issued the National Civilised Cities Evaluation Indicators, which explicitly requested that road-occupying operations, street markets, and mobile vendors no longer be included in the evaluation assessment, creating a much looser business environment for mobile vendors. Until June 2020, the former Premier of the State Council, Li Keqiang, made a clear statement on the "stall economy", making the stalled economy, including mobile vendors, embark on the road to legalization.

With national policy advocacy and local government promotion, a more socially inclusive development is possible beyond the traditional "one-size-fits-all" and centralized controls, and a forward-looking approach to embedding mobile vendors in the governance of community development is in place.

### **3.2 The Social Background of Mobile Vendors Embedded in Community Governance**

#### **3.2.1 Social Responsibility Requires Innovation in Community Governance**

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the Central Government has continued to attach great importance to strengthening and innovating grass-roots social governance to continuously improve the effectiveness of governance. The community is the basic living space for residents, and it is an important platform for consolidating the urban governance system and governance capacity. From the perspective of vertical logic, with the gradual downward shift of the center of gravity of social governance and the continuous improvement of the grassroots governance system, the community, as a necessary extension of the government's administrative functions, should take a more active stance in responding to the governance responsibility and realizing the important role of social synergy in the face of the current administratively-led problem of mobile vendor governance. From the perspective of horizontal logic, the fulfillment of self-governance responsibility is not only the duty of community neighborhood committees as self-governance organizations, but also, as the most basic unit of mobile vendors' business activities, the practice of territorial governance responsibility is also an intrinsic requirement of community governance, and the community should take the initiative to understand and coordinate the contradictions and disputes amongst vendors and vendors, and between vendors and residents, and to strengthen the governance of public space, which is an inevitable requirement to promote the effective functioning of the community governance community<sup>[14]</sup>.

#### **3.2.2 Mobile Vendors Push for Innovation in Community Governance**

As one of the important forms of "informal employment" in the post-epidemic era, mobile vendors play an important role in addressing the employment of flexible and vulnerable groups in urban communities. At the same time, however, the natural presence of mobile vendors will inevitably create noise pollution, rubbish pollution, food safety, and other problems in the community. In addition, due to the flexibility and mobility of mobile vendors in choosing their places of business, in most cases, they do not fully consider the interests of community residents, which makes community residents have many concerns about mobile vendors. With the significant increase in residents' awareness of their rights, a large number of "residents and vendors conflict" will be flooded into the community, from all sides of the multiple pressures on the community's resource allocation, public services, and other aspects of a great challenge. If the community does not promote innovation in the governance of mobile vendors promptly, it will be difficult to effectively respond to the surge in social conflicts.

## 4 Embedding Mobile Vendors in the Internal Conditions of Community Governance: Multiple Empowerment of the Community

The bidirectional drive of government advocacy and social demand has opened up an external environment and new possibilities for mobile vendors to be embedded in community development and governance, but for this possibility to be truly realized, multiple empowerments from the community are needed, and when analyzed in depth in conjunction with empirical materials, the community's empowerment of mobile vendors has mainly manifested itself in the three areas of legitimacy, public space, and community information.

### 4.1 Social Legitimacy Empowerment

According to Suchman, "legitimacy refers to actions performed by an entity that is generally considered appropriate and consensual according to a socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions"<sup>[15]</sup>. For mobile vendors in the Chinese Mainland, most of the current legitimacy comes from the administrative legitimacy granted by the grassroots government and urban management under the guidance of policies such as the evacuation zone. Once administrative legitimacy is lost, it is difficult for mobile vendors to secure the sustainability of their business activities.

As far as the institutional environment for mobile vendors in the Chinese Mainland is concerned, the support and recognition of government departments is very important, but the establishment of social legitimacy is also a must for the survival and development of mobile vendors. Communities, on the other hand, are innately endowed with the mission of managing public affairs, mediating civil disputes, and assisting in the maintenance of social security, and have a strong advantage of locality in the construction of endogenous order, which provides rationality for the local registration of communities for mobile vendors. The community can set up special committees or generate community social enterprises to participate in the governance, so that mobile vendors in the community establish a social and legal identity, and can act more effectively in the community at the same time, the community as a unit for the registration and organization of the process also reduces the pressure of grassroots government supervision. For example, to solve the problem of order and operation difficulties brought about by the gathering of long-term travelers, the Tiantai community in Pidu District, Chengdu City, on top of the evacuation zone adopted in Guangzhou, the introduction of Community enterprise social enterprises for supervision, in the orderly operation of the community bazaar at the same time, 10% of the proceeds of its revenue to be fed to the community, but also contributes to the realization of the community's public interests. Such an initiative responds to a certain extent to the contradiction between the real practice of public space and the control of the functional use of public space<sup>[16]</sup>.

In addition, it is also possible to establish social organizations led by community party committees that include mobile vendors, residents, consumers, and other relevant

stakeholders, a move that has several significant benefits beyond legitimacy empowerment. First, it helps to form a channel for mobile vendors to participate in governance, institutionalize the expression of their interests, consolidate community social capital with organizational potential, and provide social support and rights protection for mobile vendors' business activities. Secondly, the formation of third-party organizations not only facilitates the participation of mobile vendors in governance, but also promotes the formation of a sense of responsibility and a common consciousness, and the growth and development of healthcare factors to motivational factors in past management practices. Thirdly, it builds a platform for dynamic communication among multiple interest groups, effectively helping different groups to understand the needs of various parties, generating stronger sensitivity and responsiveness to policy formulation, diversion, and management implementation, and reasonably taking into account the interests of multiple parties.

## 4.2 Public Space Empowerment

The re-practice of the function of real space is one of the characteristics of the actions of mobile vendors, while the different expectations and needs of different interest groups for space result in differences in spatial positioning, which also creates a conflict of roles between the nature of the practice of public space and its original colors. Therefore, the embedding of the informal economy in community governance is not only a question of conceptual change and policy permission but also a question of how communities can provide public space to mobile vendors. In November 2023, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) issued the Implementation Plan for the Construction Project of Embedded Service Facilities in Urban Communities, which explicitly proposes to embed functional facilities and adaptive services in community public space on a community basis and to embed services such as housekeeping and convenience services, a policy that opens up space for mobile vendors to embed themselves in the community to carry out their business activities.

In practice, mobile vendors more often choose open public spaces in the community (such as community squares and green spaces) to carry out their business activities, and the community also has certain convenience in the use of public spaces. As the community has the right to manage and utilize public spaces such as plazas and green spaces in the vicinity of integrated community service facilities, it is possible to realize "multi-point diversion and interactive choice" within the community and to promote "static and dynamic integration" of mobile vendors within the community scale. For example, after vendors have completed local registration in the community, they can be regulated through the granting of licenses, etc. On the premise of orderliness, they are allowed to operate in the community. On the premise of orderliness, vendors are allowed to choose suitable locations within the community to carry out their activities according to their business needs.

Similarly, the use of the same location in the community can also be changed by changes in the actual situation, to achieve a flexible balance between the interests of various parties. For example, a "tidal market" can be created using spatial micro-re-modelling, which on the one hand turns the original "guerrilla" vendors into "regular



soldiers" providing services for community residents. "On the other hand, the legitimacy and livelihood needs of the vendors are met. After the end of the business activities, the venue can be exchanged for functions, and the space where the original vendors conducted business activities is turned into a public space for community residents to chat and exchange ideas, and the stalls are turned into ball and card tables for the residents, which greatly enhances the spatial resilience of the community.

### **4.3 Community Information Empowerment**

Community information empowerment refers to the information that the community can provide to mobile vendors in the form of organizations on policies and systems, community conditions, community resources, community specificities, and so on. In practice, mobile vendors are "intruding" into the community as a foreign force, and how to make the business content of mobile vendors meet the needs of community residents and integrate into the community development and governance is a key issue, so mobile vendors need the support and planning of the community in all kinds of information. Such maximum information content planning is not rigid business planning, but rather the provision of maximum information content to mobile vendors based on the needs of residents, to provide accurate community convenience services.

## **5 Conclusion**

Currently, mobile vendor governance in the Chinese Mainland is still more of an administratively led practice against the formal economy as a reference. However, in the course of current practice, it has been found that it is difficult to fully reconcile the multiple needs required for mobile vendor governance through administratively led governance initiatives alone. The bidirectional drive of support from government departments and pushback from the social level creates external conditions for the real need for mobile vendors to be embedded in community governance, while the multiple empowerments of legitimacy, public space, and community information from within the community contribute to the realization of this transformation, and the above elements together constitute a feasible path for mobile vendors to be embedded in community governance, which offers contemporary mobile vendor governance new thinking (see Figure 1). From the above discussion, it is easy to see that the community has the function of coordinating the interests of many parties and promoting the refinement of governance in the governance of mobile vendors, in which mobile vendors are also able to form positive interactions. Therefore, the potential of the community in mobile vendor governance activities should be deeply explored.

It should be noted that even though there is room for the community to take action on mobile vendor governance, mobile vendor governance is a systemic and complex issue that still requires the concerted participation of the government, the community, mobile vendors, and consumers and that it is necessary to carefully sort out the relationship of power and responsibility and to embed the realization of the goal of com-

munity governance in the implementation of the concept of pluralistic and shared governance, as well as the co-operation and support of all parties. In the context of increasingly downward social governance, how the community can play a good role as a social subject of the original mission, to deal with the issue of informal economic governance at the grass-roots level is not only the proper meaning of social governance to increase the capacity to improve the effectiveness of social governance but also the key to passing the "last meter" of community governance.

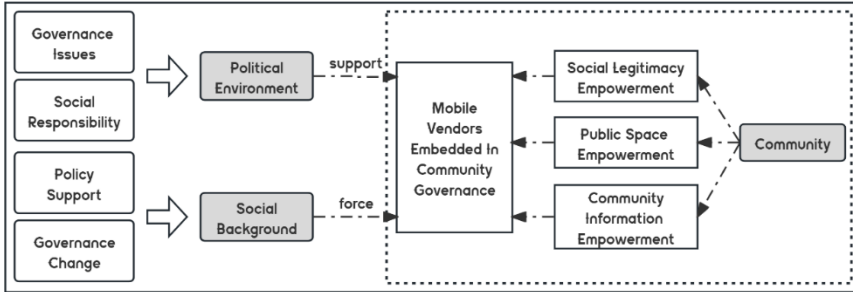


Fig. 1. Possible pathways for embedding mobile vendors in community governance

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