

Research on the Impact of Digital Economy Development on the Urban-Rural Income Gap in Guangxi

Lili Zhai ^a, Taifeng Xia ^{*}

Department of Scientific Research, Guangxi University of Finance and Economics, Nanning Guangxi, 530007, China

^{*} Corresponding author: Taifeng Xia (Email: 675269677@qq.com), ^a904268731@qq.com

Abstract: Common prosperity is an essential requirement of socialism, and narrowing the urban-rural income gap is integral to achieving it. Against the backdrop of rural revitalization, imbalanced regional development and significant income disparities between urban and rural areas remain major obstacles to high-quality economic growth in Guangxi, making the reduction of this gap an urgent priority. In recent years, the digital economy has emerged as a new driving force for China's economic development while profoundly reshaping industrial structures and income distribution patterns, thereby creating opportunities to narrow the urban-rural income divide. Consequently, investigating the impact of the digital economy on this gap has become a pressing and practical issue. This paper examines and analyzes the current state of the digital economy and urban-rural income disparities across Guangxi's cities from 2017 to 2022. It proposes measures such as improving digital infrastructure construction and accelerating urbanization; promoting digital industry development and enhancing digital rural initiatives; advancing industrial digital transformation to facilitate modern agricultural and rural transitions; and strengthening inclusive financial systems while vigorously developing rural digital finance. These recommendations aim to contribute to high-quality economic development and coordinated urban-rural planning in Guangxi.

Keywords: Guangxi; Digital Economy; Urban-rural Income Gap.

1. Introduction

At present, China has comprehensively built a moderately prosperous society, with common prosperity becoming the primary goal of collective efforts, as it embodies the essential requirement of socialism. However, China faces multiple income inequality issues, such as the urban-rural income gap, regional income disparities, income gaps among urban residents, and income gaps among rural residents, all of which constrain the realization of common prosperity. Among these, influenced by the historical "dual" urban-rural development structure in China, the urban-rural income gap is the most prominent issue, becoming the "principal contradiction" in achieving common prosperity. Therefore, addressing this principal contradiction and narrowing the urban-rural income gap has become key to realizing common prosperity.

Since the reform and opening up, while urban construction in Guangxi has achieved tremendous progress, the backwardness of rural development has also become evident. The imbalance and lack of coordination in urban-rural development have led to the practical issue of a significant income gap between urban and rural residents. With the advancement of poverty alleviation efforts in terms of intensity, scope, depth, and precision, the internal motivation of impoverished rural populations has been greatly stimulated, resulting in a substantial increase in farmers' incomes. Consequently, the urban-rural income gap has been alleviated to some extent. However, comparing the incomes of urban and rural residents during the same period reveals that rural residents' income levels remain far lower than those of urban residents, with the disparity still quite pronounced. In 2022, the per capita disposable income of rural residents in Guangxi was only RMB 17,433, while that of urban residents reached RMB 39,703. This comparison clearly shows that urban

residents' incomes far exceed those of rural residents, with a substantial income gap persisting. Therefore, the urban-rural income disparity remains one of the major obstacles constraining Guangxi's high-quality economic development and the realization of common prosperity.

The emergence and rapid development of digital technologies such as the internet and cloud computing have transformed traditional economic organizational models[1]. While providing impetus for economic transformation and development, these technologies have also narrowed the physical distance between urban and rural areas, strengthening the connections between urban and rural residents in factor and commodity markets[2]. This has reduced disparities in employment, financing, and market participation between urban and rural residents, thereby creating opportunities to narrow the urban-rural income gap. Consequently, clarifying the impact mechanism of the digital economy on Guangxi's urban-rural income gap holds significant importance for promoting high-quality economic development and achieving common prosperity in the region.

2. Development Status of Urban-Rural Income Gap in Guangxi

Currently, there are three common methods for measuring urban-rural income disparities: the Gini coefficient, the Theil index, and the ratio of per capita disposable income between urban and rural residents. Among these methods, the Gini coefficient is primarily used to measure income inequality across all members of a population and is less suitable for specifically assessing income gaps between urban and rural areas. The Theil index can be employed to measure urban-rural income disparities, but the resulting numerical values do not provide an intuitive representation of the income gap. In contrast, the ratio of per capita disposable income between

urban and rural residents offers a straightforward reflection of income disparities between urban and rural populations, and its calculation is relatively simple.

In this paper, the analysis of the current state of urban-rural income disparities in Guangxi utilizes both the ratio of per capita disposable income and the Theil index. This dual-method approach allows for an intuitive understanding of urban-rural income disparities through the income ratio while also incorporating demographic factors from the Theil index into the analytical framework of urban-rural income inequality.

2.1. Analysis of the Urban-Rural Income Ratio in Guangxi

The ratio of per capita disposable income between urban and rural residents can intuitively reflect the relative income gap between them, with a higher ratio indicating a larger income disparity. By consulting the Guangxi Statistical Yearbook and calculating the urban-rural income ratio in Guangxi from 2017 to 2022, it was found that the urban-rural income ratio in Guangxi has shown a narrowing trend, indicating a convergence in the income gap between urban and rural areas.

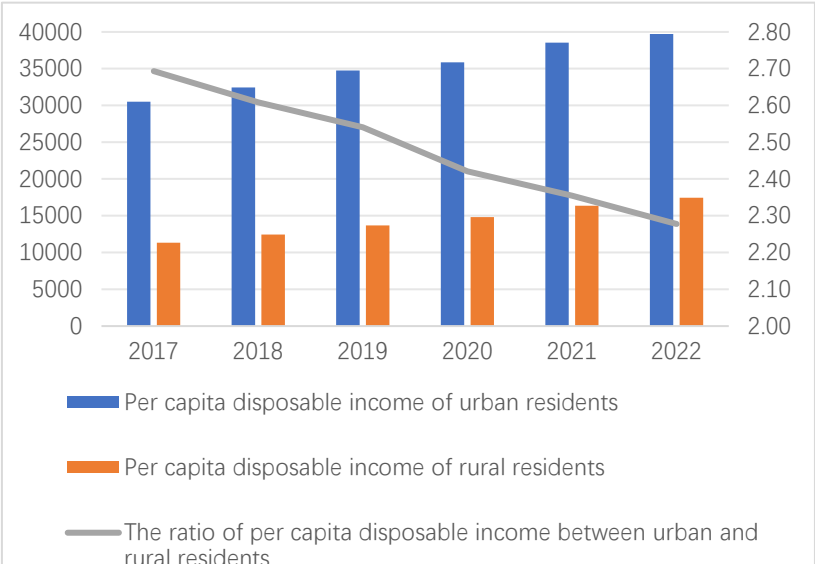


Figure 1. Income Disparity Between Urban and Rural Residents in Guangxi
Data source: Compiled and calculated by the author.

As shown in Figure 1, the per capita disposable income of both urban and rural residents in Guangxi exhibited a continuous upward trend from 2017 to 2022. In 2017, the per capita disposable income of urban residents in Guangxi was 30,502 yuan, which increased to 39,703 yuan by 2022, marking a 30% growth. Meanwhile, the per capita disposable income of rural residents rose from 11,325 yuan to 17,433 yuan, reflecting a 54% increase. Although the income levels of both urban and rural residents showed significant improvement, the per capita disposable income of urban residents remained substantially higher than that of rural

residents. Moreover, the absolute income gap between the two groups continued to widen annually, increasing from 19,177 yuan in 2017 to 22,270 yuan in 2022.

Figure 1 clearly illustrates the changing trend in the urban-rural income disparity ratio in Guangxi from 2017 to 2022. The ratio decreased steadily from 2.69 in 2017 to 2.28 in 2022, indicating a gradual narrowing of the income gap between urban and rural areas. This trend suggests that the issue of urban-rural income disparity in Guangxi is progressively improving.

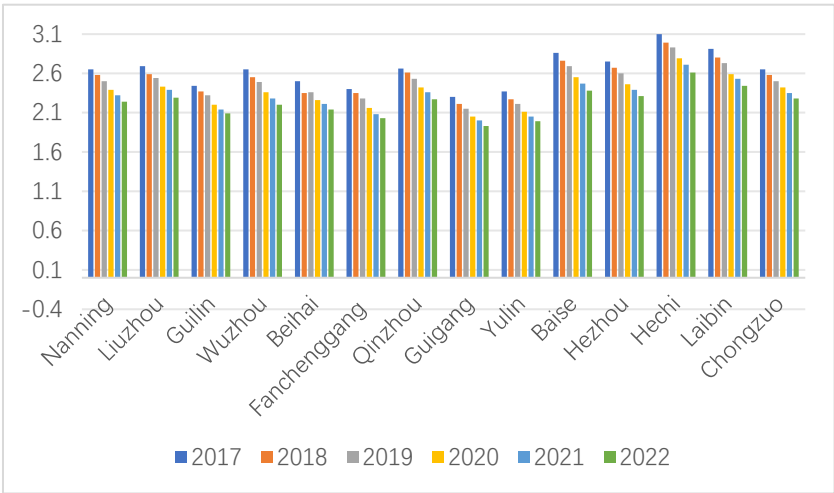


Figure 2. Urban-Rural Per Capita Income Ratio by City in Guangxi
Data source: Compiled and calculated by the author.

From an overall perspective, the income gap between urban and rural residents in Guangxi has been continuously narrowing, and the disparity in the ratio of per capita disposable income between urban and rural residents across various cities is also gradually decreasing over time. Figure 2 illustrates the urban-rural income gap in Guangxi's 14 cities from 2017 to 2022. From a temporal dimension, all cities in Guangxi exhibit a declining trend in urban-rural income disparity. In terms of the reduction magnitude, the income gap between urban and rural residents shrank sharply in 2020 and 2021 compared to previous years, indicating that Guangxi's poverty alleviation efforts in rural areas have achieved remarkable results in recent years, and the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy has also been effective. However, the urban-rural income ratio in most cities remains above the high level of 2.0, suggesting that the income disparity between urban and rural areas in Guangxi is still significant. Further efforts are needed to narrow this gap while maintaining income growth. From a regional perspective, cities ranked in the third tier of the digital economy development evaluation generally exhibit a larger urban-rural income gap compared to those in the first and second tiers. This may be attributed to the role of the digital

economy and other factors, which have accelerated the growth rate of rural residents' economic income, thereby leading to a more substantial reduction in the income disparity between rural and urban areas in the first and second tiers.

2.2. Analysis of Theil Index for Urban and Rural Residents' Income in Guangxi

Theil index is adopted to measure the urban-rural income gap in Guangxi. The calculation formula for the Theil index is as follows:

$$Theil_t = \sum_{i=1}^2 \left(\frac{I_{it}}{I_t} \right) \ln \frac{I_{it}/P_{it}}{(I_t/P_t)} + \left(\frac{I_{2t}}{I_t} \right) \ln \frac{I_{2t}/P_{2t}}{(I_t/P_t)}$$

Here, $Theil_t$ represents the Theil index in period t ; I_{1t} denotes the total income of urban residents in period t , I_{2t} indicates the total income of rural residents in period t , I_t signifies the total input of urban and rural residents in period t ; P_{1t} stands for the urban population in period t , P_{2t} represents the rural population in period t , P_t refers to the total population of urban and rural residents in period t . A higher Theil index indicates greater urban-rural income disparity.

Table 1. Theil Index of Various Cities in Guangxi from 2017 to 2022

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Nanning	0.083	0.076	0.069	0.061	0.056	0.052
Liuzhou	0.080	0.073	0.069	0.061	0.059	0.054
Guilin	0.091	0.085	0.080	0.070	0.065	0.061
Beihai	0.093	0.081	0.082	0.074	0.064	0.060
Wuzhou	0.101	0.092	0.087	0.077	0.073	0.068
Fangchenggang	0.078	0.074	0.068	0.058	0.053	0.049
Qinzhou	0.117	0.112	0.104	0.095	0.089	0.082
Guigang	0.081	0.074	0.069	0.060	0.056	0.051
Yulin	0.087	0.079	0.074	0.065	0.061	0.055
Baise	0.133	0.124	0.117	0.105	0.097	0.090
Hezhou	0.119	0.111	0.105	0.093	0.087	0.081
Hechi	0.152	0.142	0.135	0.123	0.115	0.107
Laibin	0.132	0.123	0.115	0.104	0.098	0.091
Chongzuo	0.116	0.108	0.101	0.093	0.088	0.081

Data source: Compiled and calculated by the author.

From the above table, it can be observed that except for Beihai City where the Theil index increased by 0.001 in 2019 compared to 2018, the Theil indices of other cities in Guangxi from 2017 to 2022 all showed a declining trend, indicating a narrowing tendency in the urban-rural income gap across Guangxi. Currently, Guangxi has achieved comprehensive victory in its poverty alleviation strategy, and the rural revitalization strategy is continuously advancing in vast rural areas. It is believed that with the deepening of the rural revitalization strategy, the income gap between urban and rural residents will continue to narrow.

Although the urban-rural income gap in Guangxi has been significantly reduced, regional imbalances still persist. The chart reveals that the Theil indices of Guangxi's cities are inversely correlated to some extent with the level of digital economic development. Cities in the first and second tiers of the digital economy—Nanning, Liuzhou, Guilin, and Beihai—have well-structured industries, developed agriculture, higher farmer incomes, and smaller urban-rural income gaps. In contrast, the remaining ten cities in the third tier are mostly mountainous, with less developed agriculture and weaker economic linkages between urban and rural areas,

resulting in larger urban-rural income disparities. Guangxi's cities exhibit a pattern where regions with advanced digital economies have smaller urban-rural income gaps, while those with underdeveloped digital economies face larger disparities.

3. The Impact Mechanism of the Digital Economy on the Urban-Rural Income Gap

3.1. Mechanism Analysis of Digital Infrastructure on Urban-Rural Income Gap

Digital infrastructure possesses strong attributes of externality, public benefit, and social impact, facilitating the circulation and utilization of knowledge, information, data, and technology across society. On one hand, digital infrastructure optimizes traditional industries by employing a series of digital technologies to upgrade equipment, drive intelligent transformation, and enhance the development of manufacturing. On the other hand, it fosters the growth of emerging industries such as communication network

equipment, artificial intelligence, AI, and others, creating new economic models, increasing employment opportunities, and raising residents' income levels[3].

Beyond driving industrial development, digital infrastructure accelerates the construction of smart cities. Through big data analysis, it uncovers economic, cultural, and social insights, innovates online service technologies and platforms, and advances smart healthcare, smart education, smart transportation, and other initiatives. These innovations continuously improve public welfare projects and enhance residents' quality of life. Digital infrastructure plays a pioneering role—its completeness promotes the advancement of digital technologies, which can transcend spatial and temporal constraints. Leveraging modern communication methods, it breaks down urban-rural information barriers, expands channels for "information outreach to rural areas," and addresses developmental challenges caused by information asymmetry in rural regions. Additionally, rural residents can access employment and entrepreneurship information through the internet, enabling better labor allocation and diversified income streams. Moreover, rural residents integrate into the market economy via e-commerce, increasing product market share and vigorously developing tertiary industries such as agritourism and eco-parks. These measures boost rural incomes and narrow the urban-rural gap.

3.2. Mechanism Analysis of Digital Industrialization on Urban-Rural Income Gap

During the development of internet technology, the emerging social demands encompass not only an increase in product quantity but also an improvement in product quality. As a technology-intensive sector, the digital industry produces high-value-added products based on digital technologies. Concurrently, with the advancement of digital industrialization, new business models such as the platform economy, sharing economy, and green economy have emerged, enhancing the employment absorption capacity of the tertiary sector and providing more job opportunities as well as flexible employment options for the labor force. For both labor supply and demand sides, particularly in rural areas, the development of internet technology has overcome challenges such as limited employment channels and small-scale operations by breaking information asymmetry and optimizing labor allocation[4]. Moreover, the growth of digital industrialization facilitates the flow of knowledge elements and promotes the informatization of education. By reforming the structure of educational supply, management approaches, and institutional mechanisms, it reallocates educational resources to address the lag in rural education caused by uneven resource distribution. Prioritizing and advancing rural education can significantly enhance human capital levels in rural areas, which in turn helps bridge the "digital divide" resulting from the uneven development of digital technologies between urban and rural regions, thereby narrowing the urban-rural income gap. Lastly, the digital industry leverages its advantages—such as advanced technological capabilities, strong problem-solving capacity, and a well-established system—to identify market demands, enable standardized production, and utilize big data for production documentation, quality control, and real-time product traceability for recalls when necessary. This fosters industrial integration, improves production efficiency, and ultimately reduces the urban-rural income disparity.

3.3. Mechanism Analysis of Industrial Digitization on Urban-Rural Income Disparity

Building a digital countryside and promoting the digital transformation of rural industries is one of the crucial directions for achieving rural revitalization. The production tools developed through modern digital technologies can more effectively assist agricultural production, increase agricultural output, and reduce labor demands in farming. The labor force thus liberated can engage in other agricultural activities or non-agricultural employment, thereby increasing income.

At the same time, the reduced human input costs in digital production processes facilitate the shift of agricultural production and management models from traditional to modern approaches, enhancing rural residents' labor productivity and increasing marginal labor returns, thereby boosting their income[5]. Furthermore, the application of digital technologies in seed selection, breeding, and other agricultural research supports the advancement of agricultural science and technology, improving overall agricultural production standards. Additionally, the widespread adoption of digital technologies helps drive the development of new products, promoting the transformation and upgrading of rural industrial structures. In the exploration and integration of digital technologies with rural industries, it is essential to collaborate with experienced local residents to provide employment opportunities for the community. Moreover, farmers can acquire agricultural information technologies and skills through digital learning and training, applying new knowledge and techniques to practical production. Simultaneously, leveraging digital technologies can address information asymmetry in rural employment, enabling rural residents to access job information at low cost and high efficiency. Digital tools also provide rural households with multi-channel agricultural product trading information, facilitating better information matching, expanding income sources, and ultimately increasing rural residents' earnings.

3.4. Mechanism Analysis of Digital Inclusive Finance on Urban-Rural Income Gap

Due to the scattered distribution of rural residents, high maintenance costs for financial institutions, and the lack of comprehensive credit records among rural residents, traditional financial institutions find it difficult to penetrate remote rural areas. The development of digital finance offers potential solutions to lower financial barriers. Digital finance achieves broad and deep integration across various aspects of daily life, including education, healthcare, insurance consumption, and other areas, promoting the deep penetration of financial service demands and tail-end migration. Enhanced publicity efforts help alleviate financial exclusion and improve the efficiency of financial services[6]. Representative digital platforms such as Alipay and WeChat reduce spatial and temporal constraints, enabling rural residents to access the same financial services as urban residents. This helps narrow the gap in financial development between urban and rural areas, thereby reducing disparities in economic development. Furthermore, as digital finance continues to advance, it can lower transaction costs, stimulate consumption among both urban and rural residents, and drive internal economic circulation, ultimately increasing household incomes.

The growth of digital finance facilitates the transfer of financial resources, invigorates rural economies, and removes financing bottlenecks for agricultural, rural, and farmer-related groups. It provides convenient funding for regions in urgent need of development, promoting balanced economic growth and reducing urban-rural disparities.

4. Policy Recommendations for Digital Economy to Narrow the Urban-Rural Income Gap

Narrowing the urban-rural income gap is a long-standing challenge on the path to building a magnificent Guangxi. The advent of the digital economy signifies a new development opportunity for the national economy. To promote high-quality economic development and coordinated urban-rural development in Guangxi, it is essential to leverage digital technology advancements to facilitate the full flow of production factors between urban and rural areas, thereby reducing the income disparity.

4.1. Improve Digital Infrastructure Construction and Accelerate Urbanization

The development of the digital economy has provided new pathways for increasing rural residents' income and improving their living standards. Enhancing digital infrastructure construction is a crucial step in promoting the development of digital villages, as it helps bridge the "digital divide." Currently, rural areas in Guangxi face challenges such as insufficient digital infrastructure, short service lifespans, and low levels of digitization. Strengthening digital infrastructure can be approached from the following three aspects.

First, increase government funding and improve coordinated planning. When formulating annual budgets, the government can moderately increase investment in rural digital infrastructure to drive rural development through digital transformation. Funds should be allocated in a unified manner across regions to avoid inefficient and redundant construction, thereby improving resource utilization efficiency. Efforts should focus on enhancing mobile broadband and internet connectivity in underdeveloped areas, striving for full 4G network coverage while proactively deploying key infrastructure such as 5G base stations, data centers, and cloud computing centers. Internet access speeds should be improved, and service capabilities strengthened. Incentives should be provided to operators like China Unicom, China Telecom, and China Mobile to expand coverage in underserved regions, promote fiber-to-the-home initiatives, and support "Internet+" projects. Reducing broadband costs will lower information access barriers for rural residents and increase internet adoption rates. Second, cultivate a skilled digital workforce. Given the significant brain drain and shortage of IT talent in rural areas, localized training programs tailored to regional development needs should be implemented. Government agencies should also focus on talent recruitment for rural areas by offering competitive salaries to attract workers back to their hometowns. Third, diversify rural financing models. Historically constrained by funding difficulties, rural areas have struggled to undertake large-scale infrastructure projects. Leveraging the agglomeration advantages of the digital economy, diversified funding channels should be established to encourage multi-stakeholder investment in rural digital infrastructure. This

collaborative approach will help narrow the urban-rural gap at its root.

4.2. Promote the Development of the Digital Industry and Drive Economic Growth

Driven by digital technologies, the development of the digital economy can be promoted, as digital technologies can empower traditional industries with digital transformation and narrow the urban-rural income gap[7]. Firstly, the government should focus on top-level design by formulating strategic plans to drive the efficient and high-quality growth of the digital economy. This involves improving relevant laws and regulations, strengthening cybersecurity safeguards, clarifying the boundaries of online platforms, consolidating the foundation for digital economic development, establishing coordinated departmental management, and rationally allocating resources to enhance the efficiency of digital economic development, thereby creating a favorable environment for the growth of digital industries. Secondly, it is essential to strengthen basic education, cultivate high-quality talent, and continuously nurture digital professionals. Facilitating exchanges and collaboration between government and enterprises will provide digital technologies, products, services, infrastructure, and corresponding solutions for businesses reliant on digital technologies and data elements, thereby leading and advancing the digital industry. Enhancing interregional cooperation in the digital economy will enable the free flow of digital technologies between developed and underdeveloped areas, promoting coordinated regional development of the digital economy. Lastly, optimizing the development environment for digital industries is crucial. Encouraging data-driven innovation among enterprises, optimizing industrial upgrades, and constructing big data centers to integrate and share data resources will amplify efforts in attracting investment for industrial parks. Leveraging big data and digital technologies will propel the growth of the digital industry, ultimately reducing the urban-rural income gap.

4.3. Promote the Digital Transformation of Industries and Facilitate the Optimization and Upgrading of Industrial Structures

The development of industrial digitization will also narrow the urban-rural income gap, necessitating the promotion of industrial digital transformation. On one hand, it is essential to drive the digital transformation of enterprises by leveraging market-oriented approaches and utilizing digital technologies such as big data and cloud computing. This will optimize industrial structure upgrading, integrate market information and resources, collaboratively modernize traditional industries and supply chains, improve resource allocation, and guide enterprises to cultivate awareness of the digital economy, address operational challenges, and resolve difficulties for small and medium-sized enterprises[8]. Furthermore, deepening the integration of the digital economy with the real economy requires harnessing the service roles of industry associations, educational institutions, and research organizations to reduce the information costs of industrial digital transformation, address insufficient technological reserves, and provide momentum for the transformation. On the other hand, efforts must be made to integrate the digital economy into traditional agriculture. Digital technologies can enhance the production efficiency and quality of agricultural and rural industries, creating more

income-generating opportunities for farmers. Rural enterprises and farmers should be encouraged to adopt digital technologies in production and operations to elevate the digitization level of agriculture and rural industries. Strengthening agricultural information infrastructure involves vigorously promoting advanced technologies such as the Internet of Things, cloud computing, and big data analytics, as well as digital agricultural technologies, including intelligent agricultural machinery, drones, and precision irrigation, to increase the digital content of agriculture. Additionally, promoting e-commerce in rural industries can transform traditional agricultural product marketing models, expand sales channels, extend the agricultural product supply chain, and enhance added value. This will diversify sales methods, streamline distribution channels, and enrich circulation pathways, thereby driving the development of rural industries, increasing rural residents' income, and ultimately reducing the urban-rural income disparity.

4.4. Strengthen The Development of Inclusive Finance and Enhance Financial Service Capabilities

The improvement of digital inclusive finance can enhance the role of digital economic development in narrowing the urban-rural income gap. To elevate the level of digital inclusive finance, the following measures should be prioritized: First, it is essential to refine the regulatory framework for digital inclusive finance to mitigate financial risks, ensure standardized development, and safeguard consumer data and fund security. Second, vigorous efforts should be made to advance financial reform and innovation, develop a multi-tiered capital market, promote interest rate liberalization, and expand financing and investment channels for both enterprises and individuals, thereby fostering economic growth and increasing household income. Additionally, greater emphasis should be placed on innovating digital inclusive financial products that align with the production and livelihood needs of rural residents. Given the characteristics of small-scale, short-term, and decentralized financial demands in rural areas, low-threshold, low-cost, and high-efficiency financial products should be introduced to enhance the accessibility and inclusivity of financial services, thereby broadening the coverage of digital inclusive finance.

Furthermore, efforts must be made to improve rural residents' financial literacy and participation in digital inclusive finance. Farmers should be encouraged to learn financial knowledge through the internet and short-video platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou. Public awareness campaigns should highlight the correlation between digital finance and rural income growth, as well as common financial

fraud schemes, thereby increasing rural engagement in financial activities and reducing the urban-rural gap in leveraging finance for industrial development and income enhancement. Lastly, a credit information system compatible with digital requirements should be established. Advances in digital information technology provide solutions to the longstanding challenge of rural credit assessment, eliminating situations where rural residents are denied loans due to insufficient credit records. This facilitates financing channels for rural entrepreneurship and agricultural development, ultimately raising farmers' income levels and narrowing the urban-rural income disparity.

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