



Economic nutrition guide: a primer

Dan Monafu
FLANO meeting
September 2021



Context

Who I am: community builder, focus on local level, Ottawa-specific projects; 10 years experience in innovation / systems mapping.

Not interested in selling this as a service; it is built as a community project (volunteer capacity), based on observed personal need.

Outcomes I'm after: 1) create awareness of first-draft guide; 2) validate need/usefulness in the community through dialogue; 3) find partner(s) interested in co-creating version of *guide* specific to their context / purposes.

The problem

Most of us can agree buying things on Amazon is not overall a great practice, right? What about other purchases we make, where perhaps the impact at the community level is more in a moral grey area?

Put differently: **should I encourage my family members to purchase a new phone when their old one stops working as well as it used to?**

Rather than telling them all about how tech companies deliberately use planned obsolescence tactics to continually ensure profits every quarter, can I suggest alternatives that might result in better outcomes?

Introducing the economic nutrition guide

It's that last question on slide 3 that made me put together what I'm calling an *economic nutrition guide*.

The *guide* is inspired by the nutrition chart you can get at a doctor's office telling you about food choices. And how you can have a bunch of avocados* since they're good for you, but you should limit your intake of butter, since it has saturated fats that can harm your system.

*That not everyone can afford avocados is also important to keep in mind, as you'll see from the *guide's* columns. Sometimes our broader systems do not offer alternatives when constraints are introduced, which as we know is a bigger problem.

We want to do the right thing, but...

The idea of action and effect is what made me add a column into the *guide* that tries to spell out, in plain language, the potential impact of various types of purchases on a system -- in this case the system being the communities where we live.

Showing the link between individual actions and community impact can be eye-opening: we usually want to do the right thing, but can only know so much about so many things.

Just as I happen to know enough about phones to know replacing their batteries (rather than throwing them into the landfill) is a preferable practice, others might help me figure out what to do when I want to support the right type of financial institution but don't know where to start.

We want to do the right thing, but...

To sum up, we are often overwhelmed by choices we can make, and it doesn't help that we are constantly being sent contradictory signals since everything now has **an angle**:

Do X; stop doing Y; Z is now longer in; did you know that A is now bad for B new reason nobody knew about until now?

We are genuinely confused, and often at sufficient scale that we even have societal terms for it: whitewashing, greenwashing, and related ones such as virtue signaling, when we think we've figured out what we should do but struggle with the humble bragging about it.

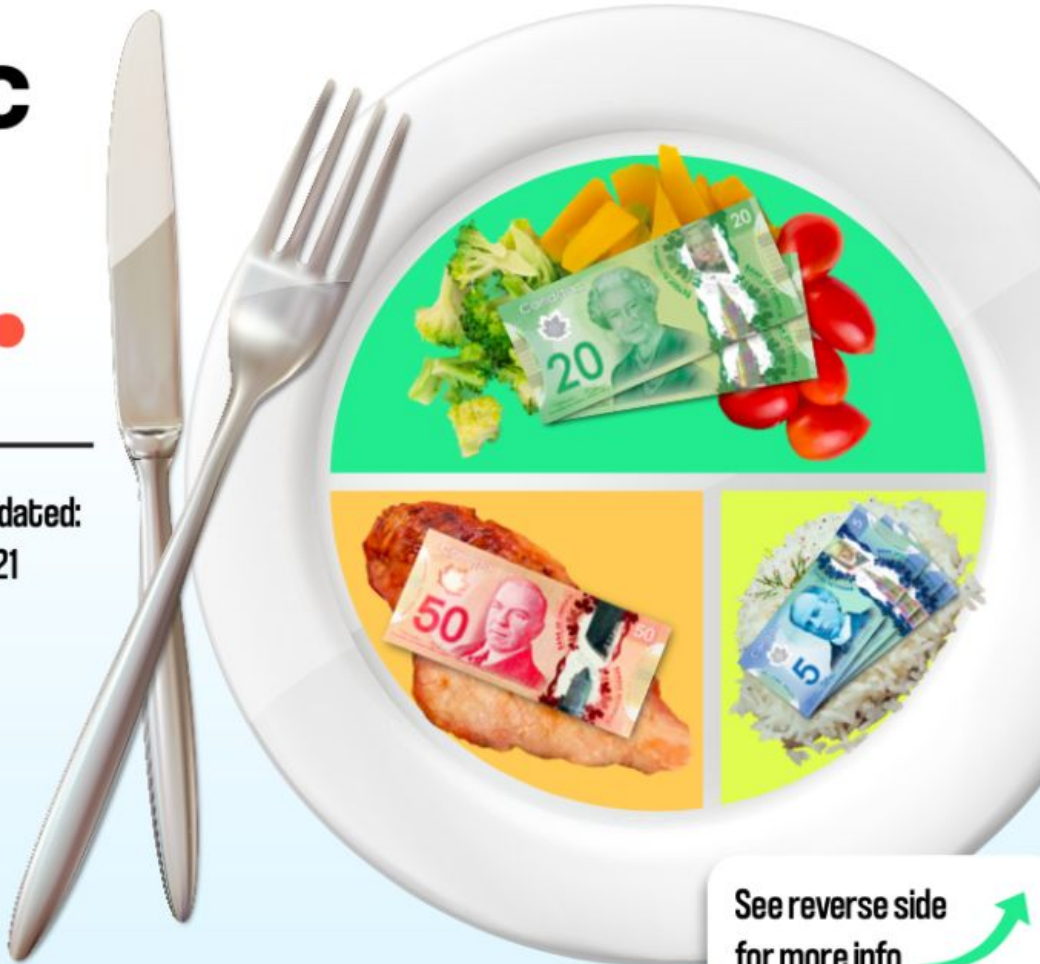
Economic Nutrition Guide



Ottawa
Version

Last updated:
May 2021

Instructions: you'll notice a few essential categories are missing (e.g. childcare, utilities). This exercise is not meant to be prescriptive or all encompassing. It is meant to create community dialogue around how our economy works, and so it is to be adapted to local contexts. Whenever possible, reusing or sharing goods is encouraged, as not everything needs to be purchased.



See reverse side
for more info



| | | Types of goods available for purchase in the economy (sorted alphabetically by category) | What it does (for you, your community) | Local example (Ottawa, Ontario, Canada) |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|---|---|
| Choose Mind Orben | Books And Magazines | Public library, independent local used book stores, independent local books stores | Increases community awareness, expressivity, social health | Aggregator: Apt613 Hidden gems: Black Squirrel, Octopus Books, Perfect Books |
| | Cell Provider | Local or regional cell phone provider (if available, and if offering reliable service), otherwise best-of-worst large telcos at cheapest price | Reduces dependency on large, monopolistic-tendency organizations | No good examples to advertise, see here why. |
| | Clothing | Upcycled, locally owned stores, second-hand, not-for profit stores, slow fashion stores | Decreases landfill waste, keeps you looking unique, supports charities | Established player: Salvation Army Thrift Store Hidden Gem: Darling Vintage |
| | Donations | Regular, pre-authorized debit transactions to registered charities, local social enterprises | Increases community resilience, social cohesion | Aggregator: CanadaHelps Hidden gems: Causeway, CSED |
| | Entertainment | Tickets to local art, theatre, live music shows, local art/theatre/live music subscriptions | Increases community awareness, expressivity, social health | Aggregator: Apt613 Hidden gem: Irene's |
| | Financial Service | Local, financial cooperatives first, then national financial cooperatives for insurance and banking | Reduces over-leveraged, unsustainable economic globalization | Established players: Alterna, Meridian, The Co-operators |
| | Groceries | Farm/meat share subscriptions to local farms first, locally-owned grocery stores next, neighbourhood ethnic speciality grocery stores next | Vote for sustainable economic models and ethical labour practices, reduces climate emissions | Aggregator: Just Food Hidden gem: Cedars & Co, European Delicatessen |
| | Journalism | Paid, subscription-based independent newspapers, specialized newsletters | Increases democratic engagement, community awareness | Established players: Ottawa Citizen Hidden Gem: Future of Good |
| | Internet Provider | Local, not-for profit internet service providers first, then independent wholesalers | Reduces dependency on large, monopolistic-tendency organizations | Established player: Teksavvy Hidden gem: National Capital Freenet |
| | Technology Devices | Repair first, buy second-hand next | Decreases landfill waste, economic vote against planned obsolescence | Established player: Kijiji Hidden gem: Ottawa Tool Library Repair Cafe |
| | Transportation | Public transit first, bike or e-bike next, locally-owned car sharing options next, second hand car as necessary next | Reduces climate emissions | Established player: OC Transpo Hidden gem: Virtucar |
| | Travel | Staycations to locally-owned, local hospitality industry first, regional destinations to locally-owned hospitality industry next | Decreases environmental footprint, increases local knowledge and appreciation for local community | Aggregators: TripAdvisor, Ottawa Tourism Hidden gem: Strathmere |
| | Choose Wisely | New Clothes | When possible, purchase slow-fashion, ethical clothing lines in small amounts when new clothing and shoe purchases become necessary | Vote for sustainable economic models and ethical labour practices |
| Restaurants & Coffee Shops | | When possible, visit locally-owned, independent restaurants and coffee shops to celebrate the good things in life | Vote for sustainable economic models and ethical labour practices, increases social cohesion and community engagement | Aggregators: Savour Ottawa, Just Food, Edible Ottawa Hidden gems: Cafe Morala, Britannia Coffeehouse |
| Limit | Social Media | Limit the use of transnational social media players; if necessary to engage, limit participation to private mode first (e.G. Private messages to friends/family), viewer mode next (e.G. Do not like / upvote, comment). | Decreases social cohesion, erodes democratic engagement, reinforces echo chamber mentality, decreases mental health | Hidden gems: writing physical letters, scheduling phone/video chats, (socially distanced for now) walks. |
| | Technology Devices | Limit buying new devices, consider only updating software for security reasons, as some companies deliberately slow down older systems | Decreases landfill waste, economic vote for planned obsolescence | Hidden gem: reverting to 'dumb' phones |
| | Transportation | Limit the use of predatory sharing economy services (e.G. Uber), consider using locally regulated, coop-based models first (coop taxis) | Decreases economic resilience of individuals, economic vote for exploitative labour practices | No good examples to advertise, see here why. |
| Avoid | Financial Service | Avoid payday loan providers (e.G. Cashmoney, cash4you, cash shop, easy cash, money mart, easy financial, fairstone, accessible cash) | Leads to very difficult to break debt cycles, poverty traps, economic uncertainty | No good examples to advertise, see here , here , and here why. |
| | Technology Devices | Avoid unnecessary internet-enabled devices (e.G. Amazon echo, google home, nest thermostat, philips light bulb, ring doorbell) | Increase loss of privacy, develop over-reliance on technology, lead to surveillance capitalism system | Hidden gems: Ottawa Tool Library, Ottawa City Woodshop |
| | Beverages | Avoid alcohol, energy drinks, alcohol energy drinks, sugary drinks like pop, bottled water (e.G. Red bull, monster energy, coca cola, pepsi, smart water, aquafina, dasani) | Increase chronic diseases, lead to obesity, sedentary behaviour, unsustainable increase in health care costs, increase landfill waste, increase climate emissions | N/A |
| | Tobacco & Vaping | Avoid smoking cigarettes, cigars, flavoured cigarillos, vaping producing (e.G. Marlboro, Newport, camel, juul) | Increases chances of lung disease, increases pollution | N/A |

Don't we have logos for this? certifications?

While ethical certifications do exist to help guide us, they tend to focus on single issue items. For example, environmental practices, or labour conditions for select products like coffee or chocolate.

Some organizations have started down the path of making linkages between their products and their impact (for instance, Fogo Island Inn's economic nutrition label being particularly relevant).

That said, most not-for-profit or public institutions focus on macro-level indicators (e.g. Sustainable Development Goals) rather than the collective impact of our individual actions.

The *guide's* value add proposition

The *guide* acts as a micro-macro impact bridge.

And its development started in a very personal way, from my own categories of things I keep track of as part of my family's budgeting practices (e.g. groceries, entertainment, travel, but also more mundane things like internet providers and media platform spending).

I've tried to think of my best advice in the areas where I make purchases, as well as come up with a list of local examples that I think should be supported. And if the best thing is not an option for somebody else, hopefully the next best thing is possible, and so on.

We don't often know alternatives exist

I felt I could fill out the guide [for Ottawa](#) since I've lived here for over a decade. In that time I've slowly amassed knowledge about what I consider hidden gems in town, as well as practices or organizations that are tucked away but do a lot of good.

However, many organizations worth supporting don't have big advertising budgets and so stay small, but it doesn't mean they're not precious to our ecosystem. Just like we protect vulnerable plants and species at risk, I believe we should protect these groups that create positive community impact for all of us.

Covid-19 has shown that many of these organizations lack the buffers larger corporations have, or an ability to fend for themselves through lobbying or innovative accounting practices.

| | Types of goods available for purchase in the economy <small>(sorted alphabetically by category)</small> | What it does <small>(for you, your community)</small> | Local example <small>(Ottawa, Ontario, Canada)</small> |
|--|--|---|--|
|  Books And Magazines | Public library, independent local used book stores, independent local books stores |  Increases community awareness, expressivity, social health | Aggregator: Apt613 Hidden gems: Black Squirrel, Octopus Books, Perfect Books |
|  Social Media | Limit the use of transnational social media players; if necessary to engage, limit participation to private mode first (e.G. Private messages to friends/family), viewer mode next (e.G. Do not like / upvote, comment). |  Decreases social cohesion, erodes democratic engagement, reinforces echo chamber mentality, decreases mental health | Hidden gems: writing physical letters, scheduling phone/video chats, (socially distanced for now) walks. |
|  Technology Devices | | Limit buying new devices, consider only updating software for security reasons, as some companies deliberately slow down older systems |  Decreases landfill waste, economic vote for planned obsolescence |
|  Transportation | Limit the use of predatory sharing economy services (e.G. Uber), consider using locally regulated, coop-based models first (coop taxis) |  Decreases economic resilience of individuals, economic vote for exploitative labour practices | No good examples to advertise, see here why. |
|  Financial Service | Avoid payday loan providers (e.G. Cashmoney, cash4you, cash shop, easy cash, money mart, easy financial, fairstone, accessible cash) |  Leads to very difficult to break debt cycles, poverty traps, economic uncertainty | No good examples to advertise, see here , here , and here why. |
|  Technology Devices | Avoid unnecessary internet-enabled devices (e.G. Amazon echo, google home, nest thermostat, philips light bulb, ring doorbell) |  Increase loss of privacy, develop over-reliance on technology, lead to surveillance capitalism system | Hidden gems: Ottawa Tool Library, Ottawa City Woodshop |

Invitation: the *guide* will only work if co-created

If you see value in it, I would like to invite you to run an exercise building your own *economic nutrition guide*, either for yourself as an individual or for your community, whatever that looks like (e.g. work, professional associations).

For instance: **what would the *economic nutrition guide* of emerging artists in Ottawa look like?**

Through this exercise, my hope is that you'd clarify the values you hold dear, since you are, just like we all are, continually voting with your wallet every time you make a purchase.

The *guide* as community dialogue tool?

Together, through the wisdom of those present, you may also find out about hidden gems in your community, as well as about things that we haven't solved for collectively.

That has been the trickiest part to digest: when I was filling out my version of the *guide* and couldn't come up with any viable alternatives for categories that typically have negative impacts at the community level.

The fact that, for example, we still don't have solutions for those of us forced to rely on payday loan providers, quite clearly spells out our collective failure.

The *guide* as resource?

In this meeting, I'd like to ask for your feedback as to possible uses for the guide: is it best used as a community tool to discuss our economic system? Or is it perhaps a train-the-trainer module & resource to help community developers guide their clients to better choices, when those questions inevitably come up?

If you have feedback or want to workshop the guide in a particular context, I'd love to hear about possible ways to do so.

Thank you for your time

I believe the resulting conversations from running *economic nutrition guide* development sessions might bring about the following outcomes: 1) better financial literacy; 2) stronger civic and democratic engagement; as well as 3) a renewed sense that any system can be deconstructed and re-made better again.

To download a higher resolution guide, see [here](#). For a blank version of the guide (non-Ottawa specific), see [here](#).

Questions?

Dan Monafu

dan.monafu@protonmail.com

613.899.1867 (call / text)

<http://danmonafu.com/about/>