



CASE STUDY | ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC MODELS ARE HELPING CITIES THRIVE: HOW THE ‘DOUGHNUT’ IS TRANSFORMING NANAIMO, VICTORIA AND CITIES AROUND THE WORLD

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As we grapple with the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing economic downturn, and the urgent need for social and racial justice, we are in critical need of an economic framework that helps us live within our planetary limits while ensuring the health and wellbeing of all people. Doughnut Economics is a promising framework in this regard, and one that is being explored and adopted by communities around the world. This case study examines the Doughnut, how it fits with other sustainability frameworks, and how it is being localized, including in two Canadian cities.

OUR CURRENT MODELS ARE BROKEN

In the twentieth century, mainstream economics introduced Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a measure of economic success. Yet even though Simon Kuznets, one of the architects of the system of national accounts that generates the GDP, warned the US Congress in 1934 that “the welfare of a nation can ... scarcely be inferred from a measurement of national income,” it quickly became seen as the key indicator of economic and societal progress, and GDP growth was viewed as the ultimate goal of countries, regions and cities around the world. What ensued was a period of unfettered economic growth and expansion marked by rising inequalities, poor social and health outcomes for many segments of the population, and disregard for the environmental impacts of growing production and consumption. As Robert F. Kennedy stated in 1968, GDP “measures everything, in short, except that

which makes life worthwhile.”

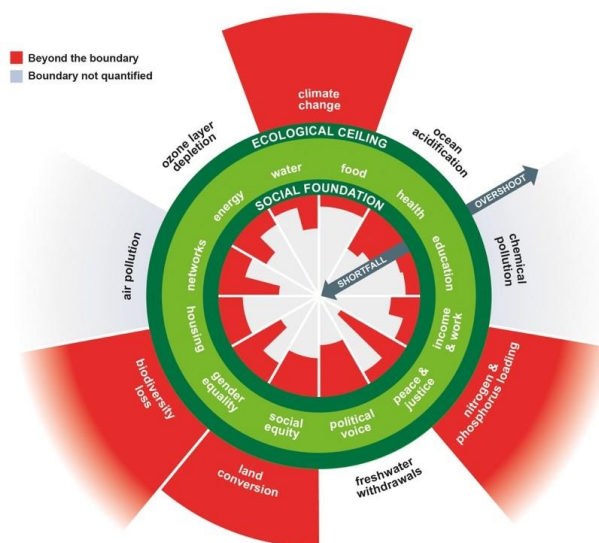
Despite criticism over the years, the goal of economic expansion – for its own sake – has persisted. Our current economic models have led us to live beyond our ecological limits and prioritize economic growth over the health and wellbeing of humans, other species, and the planet. [Canada has one of the highest per capita carbon footprints in the world](#), well above that of other developed countries such as Finland, the United Kingdom and Japan, and several times higher than countries in the Global South. At the same time, the basic needs of many individuals and communities in Canada are not being met. In other parts of the world, environmental impacts are much lower, but an even larger portion of the population is living in poverty, facing food insecurity, living without access to safe and affordable housing, lacking basic healthcare and so on. A new economic model – one that regenerates nature and prioritizes the health and wellbeing of people and the planet – is clearly needed.

Figure 1: Diagrams of Doughnut Economics



WHAT IS DOUGHNUT ECONOMICS?

Doughnut Economics provides a framework for us to respect the planet’s ecological limits while ensuring the dignity and well-being of all. The Doughnut’s inner ring is the social foundation, representing the basic needs that must be met to ensure that people can live healthy and satisfying lives. The outer ring is the ecological ceiling, which is a set of planetary boundaries that we should not exceed. Between the social foundation and the ecological ceiling is the safe and just space for humanity. As the second diagram shows, we are currently failing to live in this ‘sweet spot’ for humanity, experiencing both



Source: Doughnut Economics Action Lab (DEAL)

social shortfalls and ecological overshoots.

First introduced in 2012 by economist Kate Raworth, the Doughnut model was popularized several years later when she published the book *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist*. It has continued to gain traction since, with the creation of the [Doughnut Economics Action Lab](#) (DEAL) and interest and adoption by cities and other levels of government, as well as nongovernmental actors around the world.

HOW THE DOUGHNUT FITS WITHIN A BROADER MOVEMENT

Figure 2: The 10 Principles of One Planet Living



Source: Bioregional

Doughnut economics is certainly not the only framework being used to pursue a sustainable, just and inclusive future. Other models that have gained traction over the past years – and decades – include One Planet Living and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

[One Planet Living](#) is a sustainability framework developed by Bioregional, a non-profit UK consultancy, that includes 10 principles covering aspects related to social, environmental and economic well-being. Several cities have adopted One Planet Living as a guiding framework, including Saanich, BC; Tarusa, Russia; Durban, South Africa; and Brighton, UK. One Planet Living helps us understand the extent to which our consumption and production habits are consistent with the fact that we have only one planet. Currently, if everyone in the world had the ecological footprint of the average person in western Europe, we would need three planets to meet our consumption demands. In Canada, the number is even higher; we have an ecological footprint of five planets. The framework encourages us to consider issues of equity and

justice, recognizing that we are consuming far more than our fair share of planetary resources. On a

finite planet with limited resources, we need to consume less so that others, whose social needs are not met, can consume more. The Doughnut model's insistence that we not exceed planetary boundaries while meeting social thresholds for all has positioned it as the key economic framework for One Planet Living.

A crucial strength of the Doughnut is that it speaks to the relationship between social, environmental and economic goals. It frames the economy as regenerative and redistributive, existing in service of people and the planet and within a social foundation and an ecological ceiling.

Rob Shorter of DEAL highlights other key differences between the two

frameworks. One is around the concept of economic growth. SDG 8 includes a commitment to economic growth in every country, while the Doughnut is agnostic about growth, recognizing that it may be essential to meet the needs of all in low-income countries but perhaps not a desirable goal for high-income countries. Another difference lies in the process for determining the environmental goals, as Shorter states that "the environmental SDGs are set by governmental negotiation, while the Doughnut's ecological ceiling is set by science." Finally, the Doughnut is a single holistic concept, which is helpful in communicating the interdependence between the goals and the need to pursue them simultaneously. The SDGs were also meant to be integrated and indivisible, yet the way they are presented has often led to the 'cherry picking' of individual goals.

APPLYING THE DOUGHNUT LOCALLY

In 2020, cities around the world began adopting Doughnut Economics at a local level. Amsterdam became the first city to do so, as part of its Circular City Strategy, in April 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, several other cities have followed suit, including Brussels, Copenhagen, Barcelona and Nanaimo, BC, which became the first Canadian city to formally adopt the model in December 2020. Many others are exploring how it could be applied.

The approaches that cities and communities have taken to localize the Doughnut have differed greatly from place to place. In Amsterdam, efforts were initiated by the local government, but it quickly



The Doughnut calls for economies that are regenerative and distributive, rather than just sustainable. If our current economies were sustained, they would still be overshooting the ecological ceiling while leaving far too many people falling short on life's essentials.

– Rob Shorter, Doughnut Economics Action Lab



became a community-wide endeavour as there was an unexpected amount of energy from change-makers across the city. Approximately 400 local people and organizations – including citizens and community organizers, as well as those from business, academia and the local government – have set up the [Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition](#) to run grassroots programs. Guiding the work is the [Amsterdam City Doughnut](#), a City Portrait that provides a common vision for how Amsterdam can be a home to thriving people in a thriving place, while respecting the wellbeing of all people and the health of the whole planet.

Amsterdam's Doughnut Coalition is far from the only self-organizing grassroots group; there are currently around 30 such groups in communities around the world. DEAL supports many of these groups, as well as individuals, with tools, resources and events. The DEAL community has over 7,500 members globally, coming from across sectors.

In Canada, many cities and communities are exploring how Doughnut Economics can help advance their goals of becoming more sustainable and inclusive places for all. The next sections dive into how two cities in British Columbia, Nanaimo and Victoria, are applying the Doughnut locally.

LOCAL COUNCIL LEADERSHIP IN NANAIMO

Nanaimo's journey with Doughnut Economics began in late 2020. Its Council had struck an Environment Committee which began looking for a framework to guide its work and decision making. As these discussions were underway, there was a realization that the many social challenges that Nanaimo was facing – including homelessness and an opioid crisis – were interconnected with its other challenges and thus the city would benefit from an overarching framework that integrated social, environmental and economic issues. The City of Nanaimo was also in the process of updating its Official Community Plan, which sets out the overall policy framework for the city, so there was an opportunity to adopt a new, holistic framework at the city level. When local councillors came across Doughnut Economics, it seemed like the right fit. It was seen as having strong potential for providing focus and direction to how the city was organizing and structuring itself, while being a useful tool for communicating the city's vision to the public.

Within a few weeks, the adoption of the Doughnut model was approved by Nanaimo's Council in a 5-4 vote. Ben Geselbracht, one of the main councilors behind the effort, regrets that the decision had to be made quickly due to the short window available for integrating a guiding framework into the revamped official plan. He felt that there would have been stronger support for adopting the Doughnut if the Committee had been given more time to understand the model and its tenets. Still, it narrowly passed in December 2020 and Nanaimo became the first municipality in Canada to officially adopt Doughnut Economics.

Tyler Brown, the other main councilor who has championed the Doughnut since the early days, sees the framework as unique. Oftentimes, municipal governments will adopt frameworks that integrate social,

environmental and economic goals, such as the triple bottom line, but these tend to treat economic value as an end of itself. He sees the power of the Doughnut being the framing of economics as a means by which one can achieve social and environmental goals. Viewed as an activity that provides for the social foundation within ecological boundaries, economics thus becomes a means rather than an end.

“ Doughnut economics is a culture shift. We often lack imagination, and a government that lacks imagination will find this more challenging. We limit what we believe we can be. ”
– Tyler Brown,
Nanaimo Counsellor

After the motion passed in Council, the councillors that had supported it gave presentations to community groups and residents. City staff began localizing the Doughnut for Nanaimo’s specific context (a process that included developing local targets and a City Portrait), while also integrating it into the Official Community Plan process. This planning process, [Reimagine Nanaimo](#), was already underway when the city adopted Doughnut Economics, but staff were quickly able to align efforts.

Once Nanaimo had developed a City Portrait that downscaled the Doughnut, it used this to evaluate three scenarios for land use planning: one was the status quo and the other two represented alternative possibilities. It could then determine which scenario was most consistent with the vision that the city had set for itself. The Doughnut has also been used to inform the city’s procurement policy, with the aim of

ensuring that procurement is leveraged as a tool to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, promote responsible production and support local economies and strong labour standards. It has been applied to the city’s investment policy as well, where the city is exploring whether to divest its assets (which include Guaranteed Investment Certificates and bonds) from fossil fuels.

Geselbracht is proud of the progress Nanaimo has made thus far in using the Doughnut as a tool for better governance at the local level. He admits, however, that its success could have been even greater had it been championed at higher levels within the municipality and ideally also by the provincial government. Looking ahead, he hopes that another progressive Council is elected so that the Doughnut can be embedded in a deeper way. He also feels that municipalities, which are responsible for approximately 50% of Canada’s greenhouse gas emissions and have major responsibilities in the areas of housing policy, homelessness, transportation, waste management and service provision, need to be given additional resources. If a province is willing to invest in a municipality and their ability to govern, cities and communities will be able to move the dial faster. Cross-jurisdictional collaboration is also essential, as many issues require coordinated action across multiple levels.

Key lessons:

- Having clear municipal and local goals that everyone understands is key. A compelling vision and clear goals provide the community with something to rally around.
- Building support for Doughnut Economics within City Council can take time and may require educating others on the framework and its value at the local level. Plan ahead and begin this process as early as possible.
- It is helpful for the city's leadership to champion the framework, though not as crucial if there is broad support within Council and in the community.
- Advancing the Doughnut within a community requires collaboration across multiple levels of government. Cities are well placed to play a convening role.

A COMMUNITY-LED INITIATIVE TO APPLY THE DOUGHNUT IN VICTORIA

Efforts in Victoria have taken an entirely different form from the city-led approach in Nanaimo. In Victoria, a group of local NGOs are working together to explore how Doughnut Economics could be used as a public engagement tool to advance sustainability locally. Trevor Hancock has been the driving force behind introducing the Doughnut model and One Planet Living to the greater Victoria region. As a public health physician, retired scholar, co-founder of the global Healthy Cities and Communities initiative and the first leader of the Green Party of Canada, Hancock has a deep appreciation of holistic frameworks for promoting societal and planetary health and wellbeing.

Victoria has an ecological footprint that far exceeds the 'One Planet' rule. If every city in the world had consumption levels as high as Victoria, more than three planets would be required to sustain humanity. The challenge for Victoria is to figure out how it can reduce its footprint by at least 67% without impacting inequality and the health and social outcomes of residents. How can it maintain poverty reduction while mitigating climate change?

Hancock founded an NGO, [Conversations for a One Planet Region](#), to work towards these goals. He finds both Doughnut Economics and One Planet Living to be useful frameworks for engaging residents in conversations about sustainability. Conversations for a One Planet Region has partnered with several

Figure 3: Illustrating Canada's Resource Use



other organizations and networks in this work, including the Community Social Planning Council, One Planet Saanich, South Island Prosperity Partnership and Greater Victoria Acting Together, an alliance of more than 30 organizations spanning unions, student societies, conservation groups, faith organizations and social service agencies. This core group is exploring how it might collect all the data required to create Victoria's Doughnut, so it can provide a snapshot of where there are social shortfalls and/or ecological overshoots that need to be addressed. Following this, the group hopes to host community conversations that could inform a City Portrait for Victoria, inspired by the Amsterdam one. This Portrait would explore how sustainability could be advanced locally through four lenses: social-local, social-global, ecological-local and ecological-global.

The objective of this work would be to create tools that could be used to engage the community in conversations around issues of climate change, environmental sustainability, inequality, social and health equity, and inclusion. The community partners involved have been in contact with local governments (there are 13 councils in the region of greater Victoria, which together form a regional district) about Doughnut Economics, though encouraging local councils to adopt the framework is not their top priority.

Looking ahead, Conversations for a One Planet Region has a number of ideas for projects that could be pursued in relation to Doughnut Economics and One Planet Living. These include initiating kitchen table conversations with residents; hosting charrettes to develop a local vision and plan; drafting a Charter for One Planet Urban Design that organizations and individuals could sign onto; and collecting and showcasing local examples of what a "good Anthropocene" looks like, inspired by the [Seeds of Good Anthropocenes](#) project led by McGill University, the Stockholm Resilience Centre and the Centre for Complex Systems in Transition in South Africa. It also hopes to develop relationships with local Indigenous groups and First Nations. The aim of these activities would be to build a broad alliance around the concept of a One Planet region that could contribute to changing mindsets and culture. If enough of Victoria's residents, organizations, businesses and institutions can adapt their behaviour to bring the city into the Doughnut – the safe and just space for humanity – it can demonstrate to other cities around the world that cultural evolution is possible.

Key lessons:

- Doughnut Economics is a valuable addition to the landscape of existing frameworks, such as One Planet Living, and complements rather than competes with other models.
- The Doughnut model and One Planet Living are powerful tools for community engagement and sparking conversations.
- Framing the issue as one of global equity (doing our 'fair share') has resonated with Victoria residents.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As communities continue to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic consider how to embed a 'build

forward better' mentality into their recovery plans, Doughnut Economics offers an alternative economic model that prioritizes people and the planet. As both a vision and decision-making framework for a world in which all people – locally and globally – can live in dignity and exist in a thriving natural environment, the Doughnut provides a path forward. If communities everywhere were to move to the centre of the Doughnut, we could secure a more equitable and resilient future for all.

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