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PERSONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINE

Your Step-by-Step Roadmap from Survival to Legacy

Based on the Maraki Economic Ladder™ | Immigrant Wealth Equation™

Work → Career → Mission

2026 Edition

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDELINE

This is not a theory book. It is a working guideline — designed to sit on your desk, get marked up, and be acted on.

It is built on one core insight from over a decade of studying immigrant economic success:

Most immigrants already have what it takes to build wealth. What they often lack is a structured, personalized roadmap — one that meets them where they are and shows them exactly where to go next.

This guideline walks you through five phases of personal economic development. Each phase has:

- A clear definition of where you are
- The primary financial goals for that stage
- Specific action steps you can take this week
- Warning signs that you may be stuck
- A self-assessment to measure your progress

WHO THIS IS FOR	HOW TO USE IT
Newly arrived immigrants	Read your current phase first
Drivers, CNAs, and gig workers	Complete the self-assessments honestly
Entrepreneurs building their first business	Share it with your family
Anyone feeling financially stuck	Return to it every 90 days
Community leaders and coaches	Use it as a coaching framework

THE MARAKI ECONOMIC LADDER™

All economic development — for immigrants and native-born alike — follows a predictable structure. Maraki calls it the Three-Stage Ladder:

STAGE	LEVEL	FOCUS	INCOME TYPE	MINDSET
1	WORK	Survival & Entry	Wage / Gig	Uncertainty → Discipline
2	CAREER	Stability & Skill	Skilled Income	Confidence → Momentum
3	MISSION	Ownership & Legacy	Asset Income	Self- Actualization

The Core Principle

Each stage is preparation for the next.

Level One teaches discipline. Level Two builds stability. Level Three creates legacy.

No stage is a failure — but staying in any stage longer than necessary is a cost.

PHASE 1 — WORK: THE SURVIVAL ECONOMY

What This Phase Looks Like

You are working — hard. You may be driving, cleaning, delivering, caring for patients, stocking shelves, or running machines. Your income is real, your hours are long, and your financial margin is thin.

This is not failure. This is entry. Every major immigrant business builder — Joe Mamo, Henok Tesfaye, Tashitaa Tufaa — passed through this stage. The question is not whether you are here. The question is whether you are learning while you are here.

Primary Financial Goals — Phase 1

- Establish stable, recurring income (even if modest)
- Open a U.S. bank account and build a credit file
- Save a minimum emergency fund of \$1,000–\$3,000
- Eliminate or contain high-interest debt
- Begin learning the industry you work in — deeply

The 5 Financial Foundations to Build Now

Foundation 1 — Open Your Accounts

You cannot build wealth without a financial infrastructure. Today, open or confirm you have:

- A checking account at a U.S. bank or credit union
- A savings account — even if it holds \$50 to start
- An ITIN or SSN registered with the IRS
- A secured credit card to begin your credit history

Foundation 2 — Build Your Emergency Fund First

Before investing, before remitting more, before any other financial goal — build a \$3,000 emergency fund. This is your financial defense wall. Without it, one emergency (car repair, medical bill, job loss) wipes out everything.

The \$3,000 Rule

3 months of minimum expenses kept in a high-yield savings account.

This money is untouchable except for true emergencies.
 Do not send this money home. Do not invest it. Protect it.
 Target: Chase, Marcus, Ally, or any HYSA paying 4%+ interest.

Foundation 3 — Understand Your Real Take-Home

Many gig and hourly workers do not know their real net income. Calculate yours:

INCOME / DEDUCTION	YOUR AMOUNT (fill in)
Gross monthly income	\$ _____
Self-employment tax (15.3%)	\$ _____
Health insurance premium	\$ _____
Car payment + insurance	\$ _____
Gas / fuel cost (work use)	\$ _____
Phone (work use)	\$ _____
NET REAL INCOME	\$ _____

Foundation 4 — Start a Remittance Budget

Remittances are a moral obligation and a source of deep pride. They should not stop. But they must be structured.

The Remittance Formula

- Step 1: Decide a fixed monthly remittance amount — treat it like rent.
- Step 2: Automate it on payday so it leaves first.
- Step 3: Do NOT send more than the fixed amount, no matter what.
- Step 4: Match your remittance with an equal deposit into your own savings.

Example: If you send \$400/month → also save \$100/month for yourself.
 Over 10 years at 7% growth: \$100/month = \$17,000 saved for your future.

Foundation 5 — Learn the Industry You Work In

Your current job is not just income. It is education. Study it:

- Who owns this business, and how did they start?
- What are the profit margins in this industry?

- What licenses or certifications unlock higher earnings here?
- What does the owner worry about that you could solve?

Tashitaa Tufaa drove a van before he owned 300 buses. He did not stop learning when he started driving. That learning is what made the leap possible.

Phase 1 — Warning Signs You May Be Stuck

Stop. Read This.

- ✗ You have been in gig/survival work for 3+ years with no savings plan
- ✗ Every extra dollar goes to family obligations before your own savings
- ✗ You have no emergency fund and no retirement contributions
- ✗ You are working more hours but your net worth is not growing
- ✗ You do not know your actual monthly net income
- ✗ You have never asked yourself: 'What industry could I eventually own?'

Phase 1 — Self-Assessment

FOUNDATION	GOAL	MY STATUS (✓ / In Progress / Not Yet)
Bank account open	Checking + savings active	
Credit file started	Secured card or credit builder loan	
Emergency fund	\$1,000 minimum saved	
Real income calculated	Know net monthly take-home	
Remittance budget set	Fixed amount, automated	
Industry learning begun	Can explain 3 profit drivers	
Debt inventory done	Know every balance + interest rate	

PHASE 2 — CAREER: THE STABILITY ECONOMY

What This Phase Looks Like

You are no longer just surviving — you are stabilizing. You have a more skilled role, a more predictable income, and the beginning of real financial infrastructure. Career-phase immigrants include nurses, IT specialists, accountants, skilled tradespeople, transportation supervisors, and small business employees with growth paths.

The goal of this phase is to convert income stability into wealth foundations — retirement accounts, homeownership, business positioning.

Primary Financial Goals — Phase 2

- Contribute to a 401(k) up to the full employer match
- Build credit score to 700+
- Grow emergency fund to 6 months of expenses
- Begin homeownership research or preparation
- Open a Roth IRA or SEP-IRA if self-employed
- Develop a specific business or ownership plan

The 5 Wealth-Building Actions for Phase 2

Action 1 — Capture Every Employer Dollar Available

If your employer offers a 401(k) match and you are not capturing it fully, you are leaving guaranteed free money on the table. This is the highest return investment available to any worker.

The Match Math — Do Not Miss This

Example: \$50,000 salary with 3% employer match

→ You contribute 3% = \$1,500/year

→ Employer matches = \$1,500/year FREE

→ Total invested: \$3,000/year

→ After 20 years at 7% growth = \$122,000 from just this one decision

If you are NOT getting the full match, fix this TODAY.

Action 2 — Build Your Credit Score to 700+

Your credit score is not just a number. It is the key to homeownership, business financing, and lower insurance costs. Here is the fastest path:

CREDIT ACTION	IMPACT
Pay every bill on time — always	Most important factor (35% of score)
Keep credit card utilization under 30%	Second most important (30%)
Do not close old accounts	Preserves credit length (15%)
Do not apply for multiple cards at once	Avoids hard inquiry damage (10%)
Mix: have 1 card + 1 installment loan	Shows credit diversity (10%)

Action 3 — Open a Roth IRA (Most Immigrants Qualify)

A Roth IRA is one of the most powerful wealth tools available — and most immigrants never open one. Contributions grow tax-free and withdrawals in retirement are completely tax-free.

- 2026 contribution limit: \$7,000/year (\$8,000 if over 50)
- Open at: Fidelity, Vanguard, or Schwab (free accounts)
- Invest in: Simple S&P 500 index fund (VOO or FXAIX)
- Start with: \$50/month if that is all you can do — just start

Roth IRA vs. 401(k) — Which First?

Rule of thumb for immigrants:

1. First: 401(k) up to employer match (free money first)
2. Second: Roth IRA to maximum (\$7,000/year)
3. Third: Additional 401(k) contributions if possible
4. Fourth: Taxable brokerage or business investment

Action 4 — Prepare for Homeownership

A home is often the largest wealth-building tool available to immigrant families. It builds equity, provides housing stability, and can eventually be leveraged for business.

- Target credit score: 640 minimum, 700+ preferred
- Down payment goal: 3.5% (FHA loan) to 20% (conventional)
- Research: FHA loans, first-time buyer programs, down payment assistance
- Calculate: total housing cost should not exceed 28–30% of gross income
- Start now: even if purchase is 3 years away, begin building the file today

Action 5 — Build Your Ownership Thesis

Every career-phase immigrant should have a written answer to this question:

Your Ownership Question

"What industry do I understand well enough, from my work experience, that I could eventually own a part of it?"

Write your answer here:

Industry I know deeply: _____

What I have learned from working in it: _____

What a small ownership entry would look like: _____

Target timeline to begin transition: _____

Phase 2 — Self-Assessment

WEALTH ACTION	TARGET	MY STATUS
401(k) fully matched	Capturing 100% of employer match	
Credit score	700+	
Emergency fund	6 months of expenses saved	
Roth IRA opened	Contributing monthly	
Homeownership plan	Written goal + timeline	
Ownership thesis written	1 specific industry identified	
Tax strategy in place	Working with a tax professional	

PHASE 3 — MISSION: THE OWNERSHIP ECONOMY

What This Phase Looks Like

You have stopped asking where you can work and started asking what you can build. Mission-phase individuals own businesses, invest in real estate, hold government contracts, manage employees, and build institutions that outlast them.

This is not a phase you enter all at once. Most people enter it through one small ownership step — a first contract, a first property, a first business entity. The key is that you have crossed the line from operator to owner.

The Immigrant Wealth Equation™ Applied

At the Mission phase, all five forces of the Immigrant Wealth Equation begin multiplying:

FORCE	WHAT IT MEANS AT MISSION LEVEL	EXAMPLE ACTION
Work Intensity	You work smart, not just hard — on systems, not tasks	Hire your first employee to free your time
Time Horizon	All decisions are evaluated over 10–20 years	Purchase property for long-term equity, not short-term cash
Asset Ownership	Income comes from assets, not just your labor	Own the vehicle, the route, the contract — not just the shift
Community Capital	Your network provides capital, customers, and talent	Build a formal advisory board or investor network
Opportunity Recognition	You see underserved markets before others do	Apply for government contracts in your industry

Primary Financial Goals — Phase 3

- Generate income from at least one owned asset (property, contract, or business)
- Build a business entity with separate tax ID and accounts
- Develop a succession and estate plan
- Mentor at least one community member in financial development
- Create a giving strategy that aligns with your values
- Begin generational wealth transfer planning

The 5 Ownership Pathways for Immigrants

Pathway 1 — Government Contracts (The Tufaa Model)

Government contracts offer guaranteed payment, predictable terms, and active set-asides for minority-owned businesses. Industries include transportation, healthcare support, facilities management, food service, and IT.

- Key certifications: DBE, MBE, SBA 8(a), NEMT Medicaid
- Entry strategy: Write a letter. Prove reliability. Start small.
- Timeline to first contract: 6–18 months with consistent effort

Pathway 2 — Real Estate (The Most Common Immigrant Path)

Real estate is the most common vehicle for immigrant wealth because it combines tangible ownership, leverage, rental income, and long-term appreciation.

ENTRY STRATEGY	TIMELINE & NOTES
House hacking (rent one unit, live in another)	Buy with FHA 3.5% down — fastest entry
Single-family rental property	Requires 20% down and 700+ credit
Commercial property (after 2+ rentals)	3–7 years after first purchase typically
Real estate syndication (passive investing)	Accessible at \$25K+ once income stable

Pathway 3 — Business Ownership (The Joe Mamo Model)

Franchise or independent ownership in industries you already understand. The key insight from Joe Mamo: do not start a new industry. Own a piece of the industry you already work in.

- Form an LLC first — separate personal from business
- Build 2 years of business banking history before major loans
- Apply for SBA 7(a) loans for expansion capital
- Focus on daily cash flow businesses: fuel, food, parking, logistics

Pathway 4 — Professional Practice (The Henok Tesfaye Model)

Use your career-phase credentials to own a professional practice — medical, legal, consulting, accounting, or engineering. This is the highest-income ownership model for credential-holders.

Pathway 5 — Investment Portfolio (Long-Term)

Once income is stable and business ownership begins, build a diversified investment portfolio:

- Maximize tax-advantaged accounts first (401k, Roth IRA, SEP-IRA)
- Invest in low-cost index funds: VOO, VTI, FXAIX
- Add international exposure: VEU or VXUS for diversification

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- Target: 15–20% of net income invested monthly

Building Your Legacy Plan

At the Mission phase, wealth is no longer just personal. It becomes community capital. The immigrants who build the deepest legacies do three things:

The Legacy Triangle

1. ESTATE PLAN — Will, trust, beneficiary designations, power of attorney.
Without this, your assets may go to the government, not your family.
2. GENERATIONAL TRANSFER — Teach your children the financial system.
The Immigrant Economic Ladder™ should be their first education.
3. COMMUNITY INVESTMENT — Mentor others. Hire from the community.
Joe Mamo and Tashitaa Tufaa both created new employers among former employees.
Your success is the community's seed capital.

THE 5 TRAPS THAT STOP WEALTH BUILDING

Every immigrant is at risk of at least one of these five traps. Recognize them. Name them. Fight them.

Trap 1 — The Remittance Trap

Sending money home is noble. Sending money home without a personal investment plan is self-destruction. After 10 years of \$400/month remittances with zero personal investing, you have sent \$48,000 abroad and built \$0 in America.

The Fix

Automate your remittance AND your savings on the same day. Both leave first.

Trap 2 — The Community Tax Trap

Funerals, weddings, church repairs, cousin emergencies — the informal community tax can consume 15–25% of net income with no structure, no receipts, and no return on investment.

The Fix

Set an annual community contribution budget. Honor it fully. Protect the rest.

Trap 3 — The Delayed Start Trap

Immigrants who arrive at 28 and spend 5 years establishing themselves often do not begin serious wealth-building until age 33. That 10-year gap in compound interest is devastating. A native-born peer who started at 22 has an enormous head start.

The Fix

Start investing \$50/month today — even if it feels meaningless. Time is the engine.

Trap 4 — The Dual Economy Trap

You live in America's expensive cost structure while maintaining a household back home. Your expenses are double. Your income is single. This is the financial equivalent of driving with one foot on the gas and one on the brake.

The Fix

Have an honest conversation with your family about your 5-year wealth plan. Most families support it when they understand it.

Trap 5 — The Financial System Mistrust Trap

Banks fail in Ethiopia. Governments seize assets in Eritrea. Those experiences are real. But in America, tax-advantaged accounts, employer matches, and compound growth make the financial system genuinely beneficial for those who use it.

The Fix

Start with what feels safe: a simple savings account. Then a Roth IRA. Then a 401(k). Each step builds trust.

YOUR MASTER ACTION PLAN — 90 DAYS

Choose the phase that describes where you are today. Complete the 90-day actions for that phase before moving on.

Phase 1 — Work Stage: Your First 90 Days

WEEK	ACTION	COMPLETED
1	Open a U.S. bank account (checking + savings) if not done	Date: _____
1	Calculate your exact monthly net income (use the worksheet above)	Date: _____
2	Apply for a secured credit card to begin building credit history	Date: _____
2	Set your fixed monthly remittance amount — automate it	Date: _____
3	Open a high-yield savings account (Ally, Marcus, or similar)	Date: _____
3	Set up automatic \$50/month transfer to savings on payday	Date: _____
4	Research: what do business owners in your industry worry about?	Date: _____
5–8	Build emergency fund to \$1,000 — do not stop until you reach it	Date: _____
9–12	Write down your industry knowledge and what ownership might look like	Date: _____

Phase 2 — Career Stage: Your First 90 Days

WEEK	ACTION	COMPLETED
1	Confirm 401(k) contribution captures 100% of employer match	Date: _____
1	Check your current credit score (free at AnnualCreditReport.com)	Date: _____
2	Open a Roth IRA at Fidelity, Vanguard, or Schwab	Date: _____

2	Set up automatic \$100/month Roth IRA contribution	Date: _____
3	Pull your credit report — dispute any errors immediately	Date: _____
4	Research first-time homebuyer programs in your state	Date: _____
5–8	Write your Ownership Thesis (what industry + what entry point)	Date: _____
9–12	Meet with a fee-only financial advisor or certified credit counselor	Date: _____
9–12	Set your 3-year wealth target and write it down	Date: _____

YOUR PERSONAL NET WORTH TRACKER

Net worth is the only number that tells the truth about your financial progress. Complete this every 90 days.

Net Worth Formula
 NET WORTH = Everything You OWN minus Everything You OWE

If positive: you are building wealth.
 If negative: you are in debt — but knowing is the first step to changing it.
 If under \$20,000 after 5+ years in America: you are in the Immigrant Wealth Paradox.

WHAT YOU OWN (Assets)	WHAT YOU OWE (Liabilities)
Checking + savings accounts: \$____	Credit card balances: \$____
Retirement accounts (401k, IRA): \$____	Car loan: \$____
Home equity (value minus mortgage): \$____	Student loans: \$____
Business value: \$____	Personal loans: \$____
Vehicle value: \$____	Medical debt: \$____
Other investments: \$____	Other debt: \$____
TOTAL ASSETS: \$_____	TOTAL LIABILITIES: \$_____

MY NET WORTH TODAY:

Total Assets \$_____ – Total Liabilities \$_____ =
 \$_____

Date recorded: _____ | Next review date (90 days): _____

THE MARAKI PROMISE



You did not come this far to stop here.

You crossed an ocean, a border, or a language barrier. You started over — sometimes completely. You worked jobs that did not match your education, and you built a life in a country that did not always make it easy.

That is not a disadvantage. That is a foundation.

Every immigrant who built a legacy in this country — Joe Mamo, Henok Tesfaye, Tashitaa Tufaa, and thousands of unnamed builders — started exactly where you may be standing today. The difference was not luck. It was structure.

This guideline gives you the structure.

What you bring is the will.

Your Next Step

1. Identify which phase you are in: Work, Career, or Mission.
2. Complete the self-assessment for that phase honestly.
3. Begin the first action in your 90-day plan this week.
4. Tell one person in your family what you are building.
5. Return to this guideline every 90 days to measure your growth.

The Maraki Economic Ladder is not a theory.

It is the pattern of every immigrant who built something that lasted.

Work. Career. Mission.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Abnet A. Tessema is a financial educator, entrepreneur, and founder of **AB Financial & BizStar** (www.MyBusinessStar.com) and **Maraki Group** — a multilayer platform supporting Individual Development (www.marakisolutions.net) and Community Development (www.marakicity.net).

Through training programs, media broadcasts, and business development initiatives, he helps individuals and families transition from financial survival to long-term wealth creation. His vision is to educate 100,000 people every year through social media and direct training programs.

Holding an MBA with 10 years of teaching experience at Addis Ababa University in business and marketing, and with rich experience as a Marketing Manager, Business Development Manager, and Refugee Microloan Coordinator in Virginia, USA, he brings both academic depth and real-world expertise to every community he serves.

His work focuses on bridging cultural experience with modern economic systems, enabling immigrants to transform hard work into ownership, stability, and legacy.



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