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**Founder: Dr. Lotta Hitschmanova**

## **The Rice Web Activity**

Goals of activity: To look at localizing food systems, valuing food producers, to think about where our food comes from, to look at the connections and complexities of food.

Length: 25 + min

Number of participants: 8 – unlimited

Materials required: Large ball of yarn

Steps for activity:

- a. Introduce activity
- b. Read script as participants toss and catch yarn
- c. Invite participants to add additional “players” in the web
- d. Debrief the activity

Note:

1 - This version of the food web ends in St. John’s, but it can be made to end anywhere in Canada, by simply adding in a transportation stage.

2- When doing this exercise with young children, it is useful to have each ‘stop’ on a slip of paper and pass them out randomly, throwing the yarn to the child who has the slip. Otherwise, the kids are so focused on getting the ball next that they don’t listen.

3- Thanks to the Dig In Project on Food Sovereignty (<http://www.cban.ca/Projects/Dig-In/Dig-In!-Tool-Kit>) for the idea of the Food Web.

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Web Story:

"We are going to build a web of the path that rice travels from seed to our dinner plate, and all the places it goes and hands it touches on its way.

Invite people to stand up if they’d like.

“I’m going to tell a story and as each new player is added, we’re going to toss this ball of yarn to a new person, representing that player. Please remember who you are.

“We start off with a seed, an improved variety developed by a private seed company in central Thailand. At that seed company, a rice breeder from the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines is



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involved. The seed is then grown out in multiplication plots, by hired farm labour. The seed rice is then packaged in 50 kg bags and then sold to a farmer in southern Thailand.

This farmer, plants the seeds. After 2 weeks, the seedlings need to be transplanted. A group of women are hired to transplant the seedlings into the larger fields. After 6 weeks, fertilizers and pesticides are applied by the farmer. After another 6 weeks, the farmer hires a custom combine to harvest the rice and it is taken to a commercial rice mill. At the mill, the main husks and straw are removed and the rice is packaged into 200 kg bags. A rice broker then buys the rice from the farmer. Then a trucker drives the rice to a storage facility near Bangkok. At the storage facility, a rice grading official and inspector checks the rice for quality. The rice is stored there until the price is advantageous for the rice broker to sell on the speculative rice futures market. Within a year, when the price is right, the rice is sold and loaded into a cargo container and then onto a cargo ship.

“The cargo ship travels to The Hague, Netherlands in Europe. The container is off loaded and rests on the dockyards where an international food conglomerate buys the entire shipment of 200, 5 tonne containers of rice. After 2 months, the container of rice is loaded onto another cargo ship and sets sail for Montreal, Canada. In Montreal, the container undergoes a security inspection and is off loaded and put on a train for a suburban food distribution centre. The container is opened and the 500 KG bags are unloaded, and inspected by an inspector from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. After inspection, the rice is re-packed into 200 KG bags and put on another truck, and it travels to southern Ontario to a family owned rice and grain processing plant. At the plant, the 200 kg bags are opened, and the rice is visually inspected, graded and sorted by people and machines, before it is re-bagged into 1 kg bags of white rice.

A buyer for a national grocery distributor (HQ in Calgary), visits the plant, and signs a contract to buy 10,000 1, kg bags of rice for the Maritimes and Newfoundland Labrador stores in its chain. Within 2 weeks, the 1 kg bags are bulked together into boxes of 50 kg and then loaded on another truck and travel back to Montreal. In Montreal, they are loaded into a container, with other food products and loaded onto a ship that sails for Halifax. In Halifax, the containers are off loaded, and sorted for different destinations. A truck is loaded with a variety of groceries and dry goods. It travels to St. Johns via road and ferry. In St. Johns, the truck is unloaded and smaller trucks are loaded with their requested orders for different grocery stores. After driving to the local grocery store, the box of 1 kg bags is opened and put on the shelf where within 10 minutes a consumer buys it.

This story covers the basic path rice travels to get to your grocery cart. Are there any players or steps in the rice food web that you think we have missed? If so, please stand up and insert yourself in the web where you fit in."

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Note 1. If the final product was a flavoured rice (like a prepared side dish), you could add about 5 steps between the mill in Southern Ontario and being loaded on the ship for Halifax.



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Note 2. If the rice was grown in California or Texas, the entire process until it reaches Montreal the first time would be owned and controlled by a multinational food corporation. Also there would have been a security inspection at the border crossing.

Note 3. If it was certified organic rice from California, the farm would still be family owned, but very large and use migrant labour from Mexico, and the distribution in Canada would be via a large natural food cooperative. There would also be 4 levels of organic certification between seed and final packaging.

Note 4: Food travels on average about 1,500 miles before it gets to our plate. FoodShare Toronto did some research that showed that food from a local supermarket travelled on average 5000 kilometers to get there, often through California – while the food at the local farmers market travelled on average 100 kilometers.

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Facilitator:

- Depending on the crowd, you might have to prompt them more.
- Next, ask everyone to say who they were in the chain have a brainstorm on:
  - a) who has decision making power in the web;
  - b) how the web could be simplified to include fewer players;
  - c) whether the web represents the basic principles of food sovereignty. Why or why not?