

Bringing Fish Catch to Homes Fresh via Fish Liner or Walkathon: Agusan del Norte, Philippines in Focus

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In many rural areas in the Philippines, fresh fish catch does not usually reach the communities and homes because of transportation and accessibility constraints. As a result, the fish catch that comes to rural areas had already been either smoked or pickled or salted or processed in some other ways. Many enterprising sellers, not only the big-time traders but also retailers, have made several attempts to reach the rural communities in the Philippines immediately upon getting their share of fresh fish catch, but these only resulted in heavy competitions to the disadvantage of the retailers or the small-scale vendors who could not easily access the rural areas due to inaccessible road conditions. For this reason, retailers or small-scale vendors have rethought of the ways on how to reach the rural consuming public in no time, and this paved the way for the conceptualization of the “fish liner” or “walkathon.” Innovation and a showcase of modern Filipino resiliency, a simple motorcycle which is eventually the most convenient transportation that could easily reach the rural areas, has been remodeled into a vehicle for transporting fresh fish for sale. Although “walkathon” refers to a walking marathon, the locals in Agusan del Norte use it to denote an ingenious means of transporting and vending fresh fish catch. A “fish liner” on the other hand, is also a coined term to denote transportation of fish by land, just as an airliner is an air transportation system or a sea liner for sea transport. For the “walkathon” or “fish liner,” two styrofoam boxes which could accommodate a maximum of 50 kg each of fresh fish, are set on the right and left sides of the motorcycle and another on the posterior edge. Using a plastic straw, a weighing scale is tied in the middle of the two boxes. A megaphone is also set in between the right box and the box on the edge. A wooden frame is constructed and fitted on the motorcycle to provide stable support for the boxes. These “walkathons” could be found roaming not only around the streets and main thoroughfares of Agusan del Norte but most especially in the rural areas of the Province.

The Province of Agusan del Norte (**Figure 1**) in the Philippines is located in Mindanao, specifically in Region XIII, also known as CARAGA Region of Mindanao. CARAGA Region encompasses four provinces: Agusan del Norte, Agusan del Sur, Surigao del Norte, Surigao del Sur; and Dinagat Islands. Facing Butuan Bay and part of the Bohol Sea to the northwest, Agusan del Norte is bordered on the northeast by Surigao del Norte, in the mid-east by Surigao del Sur, on the southeast by Agusan del Sur, and southwest by Misamis Oriental. Its capital city is Cabadbaran.

In Agusan del Norte, tilapia (**Figure 2**) is an important and cheap source of animal protein for families with limited spending power. The Philippines where the population is now roughly 104 million, demands a large market for tilapia, which has been listed as second in volume in terms of aquaculture



Figure 1. Province of Agusan del Norte in Mindanao, Philippines
(Source: Google Map)



Figure 2. Nile tilapia
(*Oreochromis niloticus*)

production after milkfish (cultured in brackishwater), and the most cultured freshwater fish in the country. It was noted that the Philippines was a global top producer of tilapia until the early 1990s although most of the produce is meant for domestic consumption. It was said that small family businesses that operate one or two ponds/cages are the major tilapia producers in the country.

Specifically, Nile tilapia *Oreochromis niloticus* (Linnaeus) is considered as one of the most important freshwater fishes in world aquaculture (Coimbra and Reis-Henriques, 2005). It is widely cultured in many tropical and subtropical countries of the world. Nowadays, tilapia is cultured in freshwater and marine environments. Fast growth rates, hardiness to adverse environmental conditions, efficient feed conversion, ease of spawning, resistance to disease, and good consumer acceptance make tilapia a suitable fish for culture (El-Saidy and Gaber, 2005). Production of tilapia in cages has been practiced for many years in various countries worldwide. The earliest record of cage culture practice in Southeast Asia dates back to the late 1800s.

Since then, similar culture practices have been reported in both freshwater and marine environments, including in open oceans, estuaries, lakes, reservoirs, ponds, and rivers (Eng and Tech, 2002). Since tilapia is produced throughout the different regions in the Philippines, most of the tilapia harvested are consumed locally and are sold directly to local markets. The “fish liner/walkathon” (**Figure 3**), with the luxury of working with a smaller amount of capital and lesser inventory, is one means of making fresh tilapia catch reach the remote



Figure 3. The “fish liner” or “walkathon” of Agusan del Norte, Philippines

corners of Agusan del Norte. Such marketing system has proven to be agile in their approach by testing the waters of a particular market first before committing to do something more permanent either in terms of location or with inventory.

Sell it Easy, Save Big: the marketing of tilapia

The Province of Agusan del Norte is dominantly agricultural and produces major terrestrial crops such as rice, corn, coconut, abaca, banana, and mango, but its fishery resource is also one of the sources of livelihood for its people. Tilapia production of the Province is considered to be medium-scale, and intended mostly for local consumption, and is usually sold in market live, fresh or frozen, and readily available in wet market areas all over the Province the whole year round.

Transportation is one of the major problems when it comes to reaching the remote areas of Agusan del Norte. In some areas, residents have to walk a couple of kilometers just to reach the marketplace. With the Filipino’s resilience in most situations, small roadside marketplaces called “*talipapa*” had been set-up. However, one of the easiest ways for the people in the rural areas of the Province to obtain fresh fish is through the remodeled vehicle, which has been termed as the “fish liner” or “walkathon.”

Selling of goods in the Philippines with the use of a motorcycle could be considered very common practice. In many provinces, it is a means of peddling various products and wares for consumers’ convenience. In the country’s Provinces of Nueva Ecija and Davao, the homemade bread locally known as “*pandesal*” is sold in the streets with the use of a bicycle or



Figure 4. Local “*habal habal*” (motorcycle) in Davao Province being used to sell homemade bread “*pandesal*”

(Source: <http://davaogastronomicadventures.blogspot.com/2008/05/vendors-in-my-subdivision.html>)

motorcycle (Figure 4). In such a situation, baskets or similar containers are attached to the vehicle being used as means of delivery. The products are placed inside the baskets, where a horn or “*potpot*” is sounded to announce their presence for consumers to purchase their goods.

Such a system of vending goods and wares is not just a local practice as this is also common in countries like Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia. A variety of products are sold using motorcycles as a means of transportation. For example in Thailand, handmade rattans are carted from one place to another using a motorbike, while in Cambodia and Indonesia, fresh goods and produce are transported with the use of motorcycles. These scenarios have shown how a motorcycle or a motorbike can be used effectively to reach the consumers, especially those in remote areas. The difference with a “fish liner/walkathon” is that it carries wet goods or newly harvested fresh fish because noticeably, the previously-mentioned systems are selling products that are usually in forms of dry goods. When it comes to marketing *per se*, the “fish liner” has a better way of advertising or drawing attention because of the blaring megaphone which alerts the consuming public. The megaphone contains a pre-recorded announcement where the vendor beckons the consumers to purchase their goods.

The “walkathon” made its way

In a place where all transactions happen before dawn, *Mang Erning* a fish vendor is up early to purchase tilapia from farms or from “bagsakan” (small trading areas) to offer his regular customers. At 5:00 AM, *Mang Erning* would kick-start his motorcycle and be on his way to his delivery areas while sounding his megaphone. This has been a usual daily routine for four years of a simple fish vendor, *Mang Erning*. In his first two years of fish vending, *Mang Erning* found it difficult to sell fish due to lack of a convenient means of transportation that would enable him to sell fish from house to house. He would hire a tricycle just to get him to his pick-up market and

Box: Arranging the pieces for “fish liner/walkathon”

For a “fish liner/walkathon,” the following are needed:

Motorcycle - the most convenient and efficient transportation used in Agusan del Norte that mainly uses gasoline and runs by a motor, and could also be called a bike, motorbike or cycle (Figure 5)

Megaphone - an advertisement tool for the walkathon, it is an innovation with a recorder and a speaker, playing the pre-recorded call over and over during the vending hours

Weighing scale - traditional weighing scale used in Philippine markets and is calibrated in kilograms with a plate over its top used to hold the fish to be weighed

Styrofoam boxes - serve as the storage of the fish, and retain the freshness of whatever is stored because it is made of polystyrene thus, sustaining the coldness of the product inside topped with ice cubes or crushed ice

Skeletal structure - made of wood, it is designed in the shape of the boxes and used to sustain and hold the styrofoam boxes in place, and mainly serving as the support structure of the walkathon.



Figure 5. A typical motorbike being transformed into a “fish liner/ walkathon” in Agusan del Norte, Philippines

it would take him hours to sell his fish stored in a small pail. These struggles motivated *Mang Erning* and his co-vendors to re-model their motorcycles to better serve their purpose of vending fish, giving birth to the “fish liner” or “walkathon” (Box) with which vendors like *Mang Erning* are now in a position to offer a unique and cost-efficient retail experience that stands apart from fixed storefronts.

Travel light, sell bigtime

‘*Bili na po kayo, isda, mura lang*’ (Come, buy some fresh fish for a cheap price!) is the usual phrase playing over and over in a megaphone attached to a motorcycle. This has been an early routine for fish vendor *Mang Erning* in the remote areas of Jabongga in Agusan Del Norte. Fish vending has been his means of livelihood. He has raised his household and had sent his children to school through this source of living. Every day, *Mang Erning* would get up before the first hint of morning sunlight to prepare himself and proceed to the busy markets of Jabongga in Cabadbaran City reaching even the markets of Butuan City, the Capital City of CARAGA Region in Mindanao, Philippines.

Walkathon has been a big help for fish vendors in the Province of Agusan del Norte, as it has leveled up fish vending in terms of transport time reduction from hours to minutes, from a kilometer walk to a fast-paced bike, from hours of vending to a revised marketing strategy using a megaphone, and from just about 15-20 kg of fish in pails now to more than 100 kg of fish to sell. This “fish liner/walkathon” has therefore provided a big aid to fish vendors, especially that personal selling has a greater impact on buyers than through retail stores. The customer does not have to wait to get his questions answered. He can learn what he needs to know right then and there. Through the “fish liner/walkathon,” the fish vendor also gets a better feel of what the customers want. Although the Philippines might have been seen with a high rate of poverty incidence, such a situation has not stopped the Filipinos from improving on what is readily available for their convenience, demonstrating how resilient and innovative the Filipinos could be!

The usual old new way

Fish liner/walkathon is making its name in the local markets and streets of Agusan Del Norte. It has made its branding and is now widely used by fish vendors for fish retail. It is inevitably paving its way because of how fish vendors have benefited greatly from this remodeled retailing. According to

Aling Pearl, a market fish vendor who owns a stall at Jabongga Fish Market, she has her ‘pros’ and ‘cons’ about the fish liner/walkathon. As a stall owner, *Aling Pearl* pays monthly stall rental, electricity and water bills to the sole owner of the Fish Market. Although she exerts less effort because the consumers would only reach out to her to buy fish, waiting for hours and longer is one of the struggles she encounters, “*hindi ko alam kung kailan mayroong bibili at isa pa marami kaming dikit-dikit na nagbebenta rito*,” (I don’t even know when my buyers will come and besides, with my competitors around, it can be a challenge), said *Aling Pearl*. Sometimes they rely on their ‘suki’ as what they call those who are their consistent customers, just to have someone buy their produce. “*Nauubos rin, pero minsan kailangan buong araw pa ang hintayin eh dun sa walkathon nauubos agad kasi ibinabahay bahay nila*” (Our fish are sold out but sometimes it would take us hours or even one whole day to wait). The good thing about the fish liner/walkathon is that the fish is being sold from one house to the other. The observations of *Aling Pearl* are valid because fish liner/walkathon vendors, such as *Mang Erning* for example, sells fish perhaps for few hours only, and it only cost them the gasoline used and the batteries for the megaphone, and could have their tilapia produce sold out in a short time. Therefore, if the unit effort would be calculated, fish liner/walkathon would provide lesser selling time, lesser effort and lesser expenses.

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