

LIFEBLOOD OF THE CARBON “PUBLIC” MARKET

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The Carbon Public Market Entrance. Photo retrieved from [The Tribune](#).

The Carbon Market is the largest wet market in the Visayas. Located in Cebu, the market has been a center of trade for the past century. This cultural heritage site has withstood two world wars and several historic events.

Now, it is considered one of Cebu’s must-see places for its affordable produce, ranging from lush flowers and native souvenirs, to the cheapest price of fish, meat, and vegetables across the entire city.

On January, 11, 2021, the Cebu City Government and Megawide signed a PHP 5.5-billion Joint Venture Agreement (JVA) to develop the Carbon Market. The construction firm says that this project aims to reinvent the Carbon Market as a ‘world-class’ market—to attract more customers, particularly those from Cebu’s affluent class. According to reports, Megawide assured Carbon Market vendors that rental rates would remain unchanged, and even possibly reduced.

However, the project has received pushback from the vendors, who were reportedly unaware of the agreement that took place. In 2021, the vendors exhibited all forms of resistance against the Carbon Market Privatization: they held strikes, filed a court order that temporarily nullified the JVA, and are now seeking a congressional inquiry into the case.

This investigative report aims to understand the irregularities in the Carbon Market situation according to statements and activities of the Cebu City Government, the Megawide Corporation, and the Carbon Market vendors.

A LABYRINTH OF PRODUCE

The streets of Carbon Market were at their usual buzz when we set out to conduct an interview on the afternoon of March 22, 2022. Vendors excitedly called on us as we passed, offering everything from fish, to meat, to vegetables, fruits, handwoven baskets, and so much more. A tourist, or even someone who was just visiting from the province, would initially have trouble finding their way through this labyrinth of produce.

We were guided by a volunteer at the Carbon Market, USC student Harrie Cartagena. She leads us to the Freedom Market, where several men and women were gathered in an alleyway around a basket of sweet potatoes and several copies of a document that reads "Supplement to the Joint Venture Agreement."

Tensions were still high after forces attempted to displace the Carbon vendors the day before, on March 21, 2022, at Quezon Boulevard. [Video evidence showed the vendors' resistance to the PROBE team and the police.](#) In the process, a policeman physically assaulted a youth vendor, which is just one of the numerous attacks and threats that the vendors face in their attempt to go through with the project.



Boy pushes a cart in front of the new Carbon Market under construction

We were introduced to Ann Ariosa, president of the organization "Carbon-hanong Alyansa", an organization of Carbon vendors which comprises over 70 members. We asked about why the

Carbon vendors are resisting the Megawide and Cebu City government partnership development.

Ariosa first gives us a clearer view of the Carbon Market, which is divided into five sections: the Freedom Park, which is farthest from the fish port and nearest to the city proper, primarily showcases handwoven native souvenirs, cabinets, *ukay-ukays*, and lush flowers. The Barracks sells groceries, rice, and baking needs and is also the most well-known parking space. Unit 1 is the place to go for meat, fish, and seafood, Unit 2 for vegetables and spices, and Unit 3 for different kinds of fresh fruits.

There are also residential areas nearby called Sitio Bato and Sitio Lutaw-Lutaw, which house approximately a thousand or more families, mostly Carbon vendors.

According to Ariosa, the five sections of the Carbon Market equate to 2.6 hectares. However, Megawide's contract says that it plans to occupy 7.8 hectares, which include Sitios Bato and Lutaw-Lutaw. Evidently, the proposed size of the development not only affects the market vendors, but could also potentially displace thousands of families in the residential areas.

Aside from the displacement of families, Ariosa also points out that the privatization will not only affect the vendors, but also the consumers.



Ariosa (in black and white clothing) explains the Carbon Market situation

"Ang mga investors nangandoy manindot ang Carbon (*The investors hope to develop Carbon*) so the rich can go to Carbon." Ariosa says, touching again on Megawide's aim of turning Carbon into a "world-class market."

Of course, if it's a 'world-class market', of course, the prices will also be 'world-class.'" Ariosa says that patrons shop specifically at the Carbon Market because it shows the "quintessential example of what is barato (cheap)".

(To illustrate, we were able to buy an entire bouquet of fresh flowers from Freedom Park for less than 50 PHP. In flower shops and malls, this same number of flowers would range from 600 to 2000 PHP.)

Ariosa says that, contrary to popular belief, the vendors are not against development at all and actually encourage it under one very specific plea: that the Cebu City Government should facilitate it, and not a private entity.

She says, "Kami sa (*We at*) Carbon-hanong Alyansa and the Movement against Carbon Privatization are not against development... ang amoa gyung gisupakan jud (*what we are really against*) actually is the privatization."

TURNING THE "PUBLIC" PRIVATE

Megawide, in a statement, claimed that their project is not a privatization of the market but a Public-Private Partnership Project (PPP). However, Ariosa points out a provision in the JVA that says the collection control and management of the whole project is Megawide, while the city government is only responsible for the operations or order.



Artist sketch of the Modernized Carbon Market (via: [The Cebuano](#))

Ariosa questions the disparity between how much Megawide and the Cebu City Government would earn: according to the contract, the Cebu City government would only receive PHP 5 million in the first year, PHP 14 million in the second year, PHP 34 million in the third year, PHP 48 million in the fourth year, PHP 50 million in the fifth year, and so on. However, the agreement does not state Megawide's own financial projections and income.

This calculation also implies higher fee collections from the vendors.

Before, the vendors would have to pay an entrance fee to bring different products in the market. The entrance fee for fish only cost PHP 20.00 per basin while chickens cost PHP 1.00 per piece. But with the provisions of the contract, Annex D (fees and charges) lists the higher corresponding prices for every product. The entrance fee of fish would now cost PHP 8 per kilo and PHP 5 for each piece of chicken, among other products.

Ariosa says these hikes on rental and entrance fees imposed on vendors would also be a problem for Carbon market patrons and customers.

In a news article, executive director for infrastructure development of Megawide Manuel Louie Ferrer, stated that "we have a commitment not to displace vendors as we will do it phase by phase."

Upon verification with Ariosa, Megawide still has not provided the full list of vendors to the city council and that only those with business permits are listed, excluding the ambulant vendors (which take up a huge percentage of the population of the market) as of March 22, 2022.

Ariosa and the other Carbon vendors reportedly found out about the JVA on the news and on social media, as the JVA was signed without any consultation with the vendors.

"Rich people can afford PR, police, politicians, vendors they can pay to advertise them," Ariosa says of the multiple features "Carbon vendors have no access to that."

The Carbon market vendors now rely on social media, word of mouth, and endorsement of different entities to amplify their calls against privatization.

Ariosa said they had only been notified about the contract a day after it had been signed, and it took them a month after their initial request to get a copy of the contract, as the city council dubbed it confidential. Upon receiving the copy of the JVA, the vendors had it interpreted by a lawyer.

Ariosa recalls, "Magpatawag ang market office og meeting, if the vendors raise questions, masuko sila and they will threaten you nga di ka tagaag pwesto once mo go against ka sa project."

(The market office calls for a meeting, but if the vendors raise questions, they will get angry and threaten you, saying that you will not be given a stall/area if you go against the project.)

Ariosa then directs us to the documents at their table, the 'Supplement to the Joint Venture Agreement.' Ariosa claims that "They know that their initial JVA was fallacious, so they're trying to remedy it with a supplement."

Ariosa says that Megawide and the Cebu City Government's actions are an insult to the vendors' rights. "Gibugaoan sila sa mga vendors *(They think the vendors are dumb)*. If vendors didn't take action against the project, it would have started a long time ago."

FORCES TO BE RECKONED WITH

Several protest actions have been staged at the Carbon market since January last year. The Carbon vendors went on a week-long strike in January 2022.

Last March 8, 2022, the Carbon vendors held a small program in front of Quevabie to commemorate International Women's Day. In front, on a pink-and-red tarpaulin printed in block letters, was the statement: "THE CARBON ISSUE IS A WOMEN'S ISSUE AND A PEOPLE'S ISSUE!"



During the program, Ariosa roughly estimates that 70% of the Carbon vendors are women. She also exemplified the role of women in the family as the main budget monitors and financiers.

"Kasagaran mag handle sa budget and negosyo (*majority of those who handle the budget and business*) are women because they are specific with their costs. Inahan (*Mothers*) mag budget sa costing sa balay (*house*)."

Now, it is women like Ariosa leading the Carbon resistance. Amidst threats by Megawide and the Cebu City government, Ariosa exemplifies the importance of the vendors resisting the Carbon privatization now.

"By the time na mag-end na ang contract after 75 years, kinsa pa ma'y mabilin para mu-supak ana? Kung naanad na sila?"

(*When the contract ends after 75 years, who will be left to go against it if everyone's already used to it?*)

After the interview, the Carbon vendors gathered around a small tent in Freedom Park to hold a regular rosary vigil to pray for the success of their pleas. The tent held signages bearing calls such as "Mayor Rama atubanga ang katawhan" (*Mayor Rama, face the people!*) "Dili kami ang angay mamahawa sa among stall, kamo ang angay manglayas sa city hall!" (*We are not the ones who should leave our stalls, you are the ones who should leave the city hall!*)



A rosary vigil was held at Freedom Park, with a makeshift altar bearing calls against the Carbon Market privatization.

Since last year, USC student Harrie Cartagena, who lives close to the Carbon Market, has helped with the Carbon operations as a volunteer. She usually does her schoolwork while immersing in the area and multi-tasks as a virtual assistant at night. Despite Harrie's busy schedule as a student and employee, she still finds volunteering at the Carbon Market fulfilling.

"I am motivated by the rage and frustration of the vendors in Carbon. Their resistance to driving fuels me to continue to work here, because people should not be treated like this," Cartagena says. "You realize what your rights are, and the importance of resistance."



Cartagena speaking at the International Women's Day commemoration event at Carbon.

She says that it is important for students to learn about the Carbon Market situation. "People who will integrate, research, and do their thesis in Carbon are more than welcome," says Cartagena. She says this allows the Carbon situation to be exposed to different perspectives and enables students to share their specializations and skills.

"How will we apply our knowledge if we ourselves do not know how society works?" She asks, matter-of-factly. "How will we create a better future for ourselves?"

In July 2021, Gabriela Women's Partylist representative Cong. Arlene Brosas authored [Resolution 2051](#), which calls on the committee on local government to investigate the Joint Venture Agreement.

The filed resolution says that the agreement was "hastily signed by the Cebu City Council." Ariosa says that when asked about whether or not they read the contract, the councilors said they read "portions only". Ariosa, shows video evidence via the Carbon-hanong Alyansa Facebook Page of Cebu City Councilors saying [live in a recorded meeting](#) that they did in fact sign the contract without reading it and "they didn't have problems with the contract because they didn't read".

Ariosa expresses her and the carbon vendors' collective frustration with what they think of as corporate overlords belittling them. She recalls a statement made by the late Cebu City mayor, Edgar Labella, in which he said that the carbon vendors are the "lifeflood of the carbon market."

"If we really are the 'lifeflood' of the market, then why is the city alienating us in favor of big investors?" she asks.

As of writing, we have yet to reach out to Megawide Corporation and the Cebu City Government for comment.

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