Revista Brasileira de Agroecologia
ISSN 1980-9735

Brasília, v. 21, n. 2, p. 211-222, 2026
https://doi.org/10.33240/rba.v21i2.59599

# The role of collective trademarks in reducing information asymmetry in the agroecological market

O uso de marcas coletivas como estratégia para reduzir assimetrias de informação no mercado de agroecológicos

El uso de marcas colectivas como estrategia para reducir asimetrías de información en el mercado agroecológico

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Received on: 08 Sep 2025 - Accepted on: 16 Dec 2025 – Published on: 01 Apr 2026

## Abstract

Information asymmetry undermines trust and fair remuneration in agroecological markets. The study examines whether collective trademarks, conceived as place-based brands, function as signals of origin and agroecological practices. It combines a literature review with a normative and institutional analysis in Brazil, contrasting third-party and participatory certification systems, geographical indications, and collective trademarks, from which criteria for an effective market signal are derived. The findings highlight limits of geographical indications for diversified, small-scale production systems and identify five criteria for an effective signal: flexible collective governance, coverage of products and services, accommodation of diversity, accessibility, and territorial reference. The study concludes that a collective trademark, when framed as a territorial brand, materializes credibility attributes, reduces information asymmetries, and strengthens agroecological territories.
**Keywords:** Quality signaling, Territoriality, Information economics, Place brand.

## Resumo

A assimetria de informação fragiliza a confiança e a remuneração em mercados agroecológicos. O estudo examina se marcas coletivas, concebidas como marcas de lugar, atuam como sinal de origem e de práticas agroecológicas. Combina revisão de literatura e análise normativo-institucional no Brasil, contrastando certificações por auditoria e participativas, indicações geográficas e marcas coletivas, a partir das quais derivam critérios de sinal eficaz. Os achados evidenciam limites das indicações geográficas para arranjos diversificados e de pequena escala e identificam cinco critérios para um sinal eficaz: governança coletiva flexível, cobertura de produtos e serviços, acomodação da diversidade, acessibilidade e referência territorial. Conclui que a marca coletiva, orientada como marca territorial, materializa atributos de credibilidade, reduz as assimetrias e fortalece os territórios agroecológicos.
**Palavras-chave:** Sinalização de qualidade, Territorialidade, Economia da informação, Marca de lugar.

## Resumen

La asimetría de información debilita la confianza y la remuneración en los mercados agroecológicos. El estudio examina si las marcas colectivas, concebidas como marcas de lugar, funcionan como señales de origen y de prácticas agroecológicas. Combina la revisión de la literatura y el análisis normativo-institucional en Brasil, contrastando certificaciones por auditoría y participativas, indicaciones geográficas y marcas colectivas, a partir de lo cual se derivan criterios de señal eficaz. Los hallazgos evidencian los límites de las indicaciones geográficas para arreglos diversificados y de pequeña escala, e identifican cinco criterios para una señal eficaz: gobernanza colectiva flexible, cobertura de bienes y servicios, acomodación de la diversidad, accesibilidad y referencia territorial. Concluye que la marca colectiva, concebida como marca territorial, materializa atributos de credibilidad, reduce las asimetrías y fortalece los territorios agroecológicos.
**Palabras-clave:** Señalización de calidad, Territorialidad, Economía de la información, Marca de lugar.

The increasing demand for food associated with population growth poses a major challenge to the planet's environmental limits (Shaikh; Hadjikakou; Bryan, 2021). Multilateral institutions, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), have promoted production systems that simultaneously provide food and preserve the natural environment (FAO, 2014). This objective is reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly "Zero Hunger" (SDG 2) and "Life on Land" (SDG 15) (ONU, 2015).

Agroecology is a production system that aims to reconcile food production with environmental conservation to achieve ecological, economic, and social sustainability from production to consumption (Gliessman, 2016). This system involves dynamic changes in the management of agroecosystems in small-scale production (e.g., peasant, indigenous, and family farming production), integrating local knowledge, traditional practices, and technological innovations (Val *et al.*, 2019). These attributes are appreciated by an increasingly aware consumer market (Alghamdi; Agag, 2024).

The context of increasingly valuable agroecological products increases the risk of harmful deceptive practices affecting both producers and consumers. For example, green-washing consists of products and services that are falsely labelled as organic in order to gain competitive advantages (Spaniol *et al.*, 2024). From an economic theory perspective, this scenario suggests that the agroecological market may be affected by information asymmetry.

Information asymmetry occurs when market agents have different levels of information about a good, particularly when a seller knows more about product quality than a buyer. This condition results in adverse selection, meaning a market environment in which low-quality products tend to predominate because consumers are unable to distinguish between high- and low-quality products or are unwilling to pay higher prices for products of proven quality (Akerlof, 1970).

To avoid the predominance of low-quality products, it is necessary to create signals that allow consumers to perceive a quality product (Spence, 1973), particularly the

authenticity of agroecological products. Such signals support consumer decision-making processes by enabling them to choose these products and to pay fair prices to producers. However, establishing such signals involves transaction costs, including those associated with certification and labelling (Coase, 1960). Collective action among agroecological producers may benefit from strategies that reduce transactional cost, for instance by sharing the cost of building a collective identity that links products to their territory of origin.

Overall, agroecological production is grounded in collective and territorialized systems (Val *et al.*, 2019), which gives representative organizations a central role in formulating marketing strategies. As Finatto and Eduardo (2021, pp. 15-16) note, "peasant farmers do not act individually in production; rather, they are embedded in a social network that involves NGO technicians, consumers, support organizations, and other farmers"[1].

Brazilian Federal Law No. 9.279/1996 establishes collective trademarks as instruments to identify products and services provided by collective organizations (Brasil, 1996), with the potential to signal agroecological products in the market. A key step in this process is to frame the collective trademark as a territorial signal based on the place-branding approach, understood as the "dialogue among stakeholders who collectively produce while considering local identities and culture as important input"[2] (Rocha; Guimarães, 2023, pp. 16527).

In light of Brazilian Federal Law No. 9.279/1996, this paper aims to demonstrate that a collective trademark, when grounded in a place-branding approach, can signal the origin of agroecological products in the market.

In agroecology, territory is more than a form of physical support; it is a living space that intertwines ecological processes, social relationships, and cultural identities (Wezel *et al.*, 2016). In contrast to conventional agriculture, in which land is treated as a controlled physical resource, territory in agroecology plays a central role in technical

[1] Our translation of the following original version: "Os camponeses não organizam individualmente a sua produção, mas o fazem imersos em uma rede, que pode envolver técnicos, representantes de ONGs, consumidores, entidades de apoio e outros agricultores".

[2] Our translation of the following original version: "como um diálogo entre as partes interessadas, que produzem coletivamente a marca, tendo a identidade e cultura locais como matéria-prima".

experimentation and the reorganization of family labor, resulting in a sustainable way of life that integrates ecological, economic, political, and cultural dimensions (Eduardo, 2016).

Currently, the scientific literature establishes two main concepts: organic agriculture and agroecology. Organic agriculture is primarily market-oriented and based on the substitution of conventional inputs with certified organic alternatives (Medaets; Fornazier; Thomé, 2020). In contrast, agroecology is grounded in the pursuit of harmony between human and nature and redefines the notion of land use, shifting from a logic of dominance to one of stewardship (Medaets; Fornazier; Thomé, 2020). The difference between agroecology and organic agriculture goes beyond the mere avoidance of chemical inputs. Agroecology incorporates broader values, such as social justice, food sovereignty, and collective forms of management (Altieri; Toledo, 2011). These distinctions contribute to the formation of credibility attributes (Darby; Karni, 1973), including ethical commitment, health concerns, environmental sustainability, and the valorization of local identity.

According to Information Economics Theory, the quality attributes of a given product can be classified into three categories: search attributes, experience attributes, and credence (or credibility) attributes. Search attributes are aspects of product quality that consumers can evaluate before purchase through visual or observable characteristics, such as appearance, color, price, and labeling. Experience attributes, in turn, are quality aspects that can only be assessed after purchase and consumption, as they depend on the consumer's actual use of the product (Nelson, 1970; Schrobback *et al.*, 2023).

Finally, credence attributes are those that consumers cannot readily evaluate before or after consumption. In such case, external signals – such as certifications, brands, or reputation – are required to support consumers' decision-making process. The situation in which producers possess more information about product quality than consumers is referred to as information asymmetry (Darby; Karni, 1973; Schrobback *et al.*, 2023).

The information asymmetry in the food market has been widely discussed in the scientific literature, particularly as a major challenge for products with credibility attributes

(Schrobback *et al.*, 2023). This asymmetry constrains the expansion of supply in such markets, as consumers are unable to directly verify certain quality aspects even after consumption. Consequently, it calls for sustained efforts in research and public policy to design effective mechanisms to reduce information gaps and foster market development (Schrobback *et al.*, 2023).

Consumers often value the credence attributes of "green" products, even though these characteristics are not directly observable (Migliore *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, strategies are needed to translate such credence attributes into a quasi-search quality attribute, thereby making them more verifiable prior to purchase. This transformation represents a more effective way to generate credible signals of trust in the market (Karstens; Belz, 2006).

Studies addressing information asymmetry in agroecological markets remain scarce, representing a significant gap in scientific literature (Pavlinović Mršić, 2017). Most existing research has focused predominantly on organic products. In some cases, the terms 'organic' and 'agroecological' are used interchangeably (Pavlinović Mršić, 2017). However, despite important conceptual and practical differences between these two approaches, as discussed above, some conclusions drawn from studies on organic products may also be applicable to agroecological products, particularly given their shared reliance on credence attributes. In this context, the main instruments used to transform credence attributes into quasi-search attributes in organic products are guarantee-based instruments, including quality standards, seals, and certifications (Pavlinović Mršić, 2017).

In Brazil, the organic production system is regulated by the Federal Law No. 10,831 (23/12/2003) (Brasil, 2003), which also encompasses agroecological production. The law established the Brazilian System for Organic Compliance Assessment (SisOrg in Portuguese abbreviation), which identifies a product as organic through three mechanisms: a) certification via compliance audit; b) the Participatory Guarantee System (SPG in Portuguese abbreviation); and c) social control of direct sales. Products certified through the first two mechanisms carry the SisOrg Seal on their labels, providing traceability and transparency in the market.

Both certification through compliance audits and SPG are carried out by independent organizations through technical inspection (Radomsky, 2015). In contrast, the social control of direct sales is the only mechanism based exclusively on participatory certification.

The participatory certification emerged from a bottom-up initiative rooted in collective agroecological social movements that opposed external audit schemes previously inaccessible to family farmers. It was also conceived as an alternative to an excessively technical certification process conducted through a third-party audit, which tended to overlook the cultural dimensions of agroecological production. In particular, these conventional approaches often neglected the importance of social learning processes that facilitate the integration of family farmers into markets and contribute to the improvement of ecosystem management (Medaets; Fornazier; Thomé, 2020; Niederle; Dorville; Lemeilleur, 2021).

One limitation of third-party audits highlighted in the international literature is that the certification process for organic products often tends to homogenize the production system. As a result, organic products become standardized, contrasting with the diversity inherent in traditional and local systems of production and consumption – an issue frequently emphasized by agroecological organizations (Niederle; Dorville; Lemeilleur, 2021).

In Brazil's SisOrg system, one limitation of the organic certification process is its exclusive focus on tangible products. From this perspective, services arising from agroecological management - such as community-based tourism, cultural experience, and environmental education - are not encompassed by the certification system.

Organic products, most especially agroecological ones, are often traded through short marketing circuits, in local markets, where buyers and producers maintain trust-based economic relationships. This context fosters the reputation of organics or agroecological local markets, functioning as a form of collective trademarks derived from private certification. Such collective trademarks rely on production regulations established and managed within producer-led social networks (Medaets; Cechin, 2019).

In local food economies, the close connection between products and their production systems facilitates consumers' understanding of how and where food is produced. Labeling serves as the primary information mechanism for this purpose, particularly when it explicitly links producers to the place of production. The articulation of agriculture, landscape, biodiversity, and territorial identity is conceptualized as ecological localization. This is a dynamic process grounded in territorial branding strategies. Through ecological localization, agriculture is re-positioned to generate benefits and services that extend the provision of food commodities, encompassing the management of cultural and ecological landscapes. In doing so, it also fulfils an important social function by supporting peripheral populations (Ilbery; Maye, 2007, p. 508).

The use of "seals" within the context of ecological localization signals that the articulation of product, place, and process constitutes a strategic resource. Through this linkage, way of life, labour process, and the natural characteristic of territories can generate economic benefits for producers when effectively associated with specific products (Ilbery; Maye, 2007; Radomsky, 2015).

Under Brazilian legislation, the instrument that links a product or service to its local origin is the Geographical Indication (GI), established by Federal Law No. 9,279 (14/05/1996). However, the application of this mechanism to agroecological production remains limited, as this model is predominantly characterized by small-scale producers and diversified production systems, which do not always align with the standardization requirements typically associated with Geographical Indications.

Although Geographical Indication frequently emphasizes territorial origin, the Brazilian regulatory framework presupposes standardization and governance structures oriented toward a single product, requirements that conflict with agroecological systems, which are typically characterized by diversified products. The cost associated with auditing and adapting multiple products simultaneously can be prohibitive for small-scale producers, thereby creating barriers to market entry and increasing the risk of regulatory capture. As a result, GIs may tend to homogenize what is inherently heterogeneous, potentially excluding producers who depend on such labels to add value to their territory (Niederle; Gelain, 2013; Cardoso *et al*., 2022).

The requirement that Geographical Indications be structured around a flagship product conflicts with the multisectoral diversification typical of agroecological organizations. From this perspective, signalling instruments are needed that both effectively inform consumers and remain accessible to small-scale producers.

Five characteristics are essential in defining a signalling instrument capable of reducing information asymmetry in the agroecological market: a) it should have flexible and collective management; b) it should encompass both products and services; c) it should accommodate intra-associative diversity; d) it should be accessible to small-scale producers; and e) it should be locally grounded or territorially referenced.

The instrument within the Brazilian legal framework that aligns with these five characteristics is the collective trademark, established by Federal Law No. 9,279 (14/05/1996). By circumventing the numerous technical requirements associated with Geographical Indications – such as proving historical association and formal territorial control - and allowing rules tailored to local needs, collective trademarks provide an accessible and inclusive signalling mechanism for small-scale producers. In addition, collective trademarks, structured as a brand that certifies the territorial origin of a product or service and conveys its credence-based quality attribute, can help reduce information asymmetry, ultimately benefiting consumers.

Collective trademarks do not inherently link a product or service to a specific territory, whereas Geographical Indications do. The primary purpose of a collective trademark is to connect a product or service to a particular community of producers. However, a collective trademark can also represent a territory, especially when the community is territorially based, and its identity is expressed through its products and services. The legal framework underpinning collective trademarks can thus signal territorial affiliation, reinforcing the relationship between local actors and their production (Rocha; Guimarães, 2023).

Branding is a relevant and valuable concept for local communities, even at the sectorial level, as it helps confer status to products and services traded under its aegis (Anholt, 2010). When applied to territories, branding – together with associated marketing and

management strategies – is referred to as place branding (Rocha; Guimarães, 2023). In this context, while traditional branding reflects consumers' perception of a specific brand, place branding reflects consumers' perceptions of a territorial brand (Almeida, 2018).

As a concrete example of the proposition of this work, it is possible to mention the collective brand Empório do Cerrado. Empório do Cerrado constitutes a collective brand linked to CoopCerrado, articulating a network of family farmers and communities that produce and sell food associated with socio-biodiversity, with an emphasis on agroecological and organic practices in Cerrado territories and transition areas with other biomes. By identifying, under a common badge, the products offered by the network's members, the brand presents itself as an instrument of collective positioning and communication of origin and territorial belonging (Empório do Cerrado, n.d.).

In the case of the collective brand Empório do Cerrado, trust does not only arise from the graphic symbol but from the governance arrangement that supports it: the right to use the sign is conditioned on the offerer's link to the collective and compliance with common rules of use and presentation, which creates a shared minimum standard. For the end consumer, the seal works as an informational shortcut (reputational signal), reducing uncertainty about origin and provenance by indicating that the product is associated with a recognizable set of collective commitments. Authenticity, in turn, is reinforced by the delimitation of who may use the sign and the possibility of control and liability in case of misuse, which discourages falsification and opportunism and, consequently, strengthens the product's credibility in the market (Empório do Cerrado, n.d.).

This panorama highlights a potential gap between the socio-environmental wealth of agroecological products and services and the current limitations of regulatory instruments in effectively communicating this value to the market without excluding small-scale producers. This study addresses this gap by examining collective trademarks from a place branding perspective, presenting them as flexible, inclusive, and economically viable territorial signals. Such an approach offers a promising pathway to transform credence attributes into quasi-search attributes for agroecological products in the marketplace.

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