

Can we fight illegal drugs with communication campaigns? An experimental approach

M.Ibanez
J. Vasquez

Abstract

Eradication is the main policy instrument used to fight coca cultivation. About two thirds of the resources used on the war on drugs are devoted to eradication campaigns. However, coca cultivation is not only driven by economic incentives. Morality and legitimacy of the institutions are key factors explaining the growth of coca cultivation in Colombia (Ibanez, 2010). Changing people's perceptions about the problems that coca entails for the family and the community seems to be a powerful instrument in the war on drugs. The purpose of this paper is to study the impact of communication campaigns aiming to generate a culture of lawfulness in the attitudes (and behavior) towards coca cultivation.

We use a framed field experiment that captures the main characteristics of coca cultivation. Participants receive a monetary endowment and have to decide how much they want to invest in coca. The endowment that is not invested in coca is invested in an alternative. Investments in coca generate a higher return than investments in the alternative, yet with a given probability authorities can fine coca producers. Coca has the characteristics of a public bad and each unit invested in coca generates negative externalities. In our experiment, we test the impact of different statements on the negative effects that coca generate on farmers willingness to invest in coca. In the control treatment, it is explained that coca generates negative effects, but no further detail is given on why that is the case. We compare this control treatment with treatments in which coca investments are related with: violence, environmental damage and change in social values.

We ran experiments with 694 participants in 4 municipalities of Putumayo, Colombia, a region where coca has historically been grown. Compared with the control treatment, we find that statements that relate coca to violence or to a change of values in the youth lead to a significant higher reduction in coca cultivation, whereas messages that refer to the environment lead to a slight increase in coca cultivation.

Findings also suggest a decrease in coca cultivation when the risk of being caught is higher and when the profits of legal activities increase. We conclude that whatever strategy used to fight coca cultivation must include not only economic alternatives and threats, but also must appeal to moral issues in order to be sustainable in the long run.