



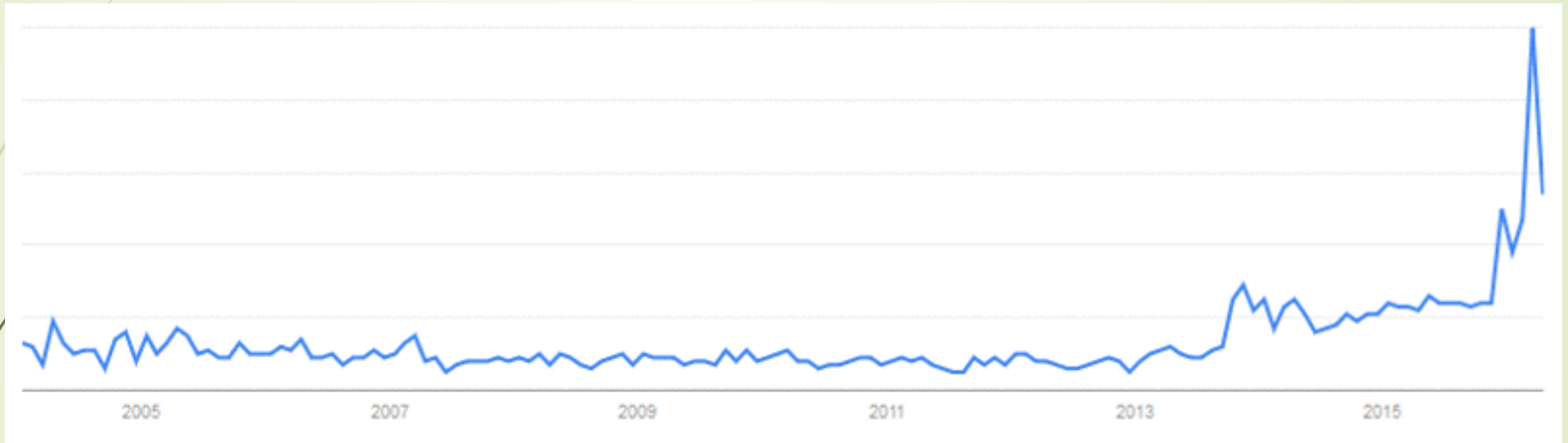
# THE POLITICS OF PILOTING A UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME: CAUTIONARY REFLECTIONS

Seminario Internacional “RENTA BÁSICA Y DISTRIBUCIÓN DE LA RIQUEZA”  
Senado de la República de Mexico, 18-19 April 2016

Jurgen De Wispelaere, PhD  
School of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Tampere

Email: [jurgen.dewispelaere@gmail.com](mailto:jurgen.dewispelaere@gmail.com)

# Basic income attention, 2005-2016



Source: Scott Santens, Basic Income on the March (Google Trends)

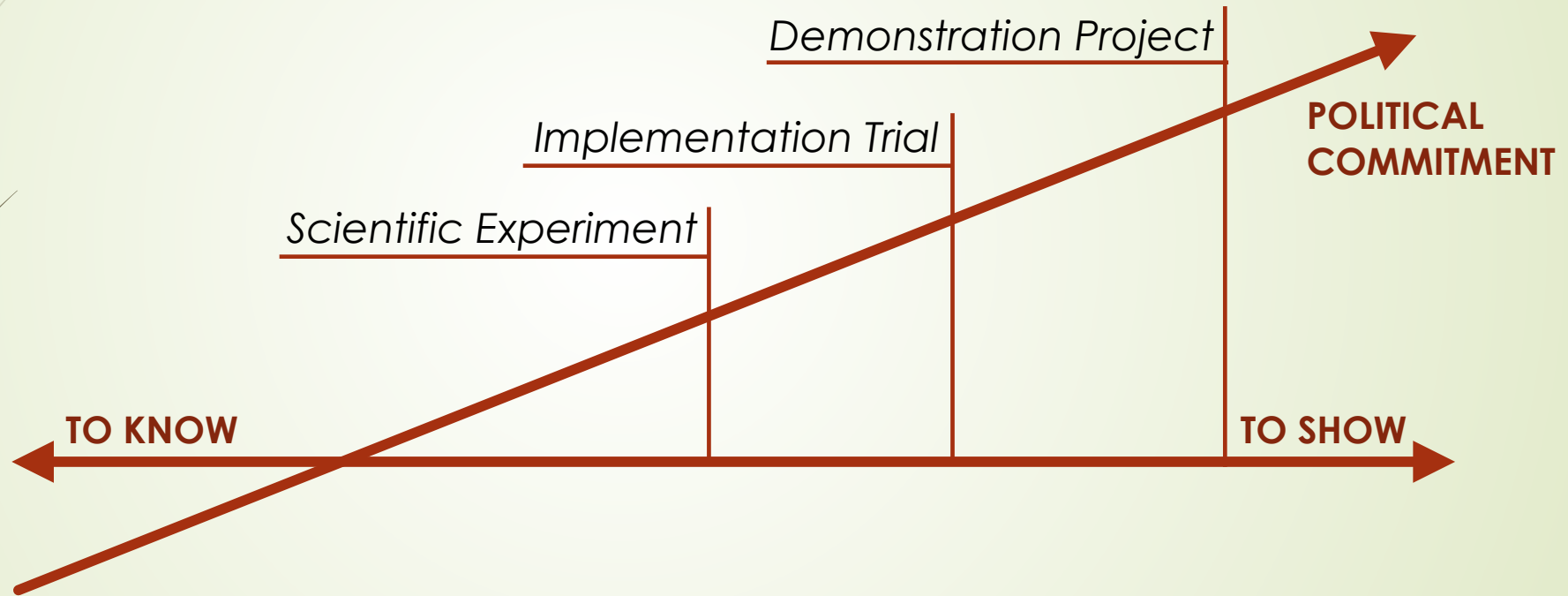
# Why basic income pilots now?

- Background context of 2008 financial crisis and its reaction: austerity, poverty and economic inequality ...
- Growth of evidence-based policy-making
- Attention-grabbing events: Switzerland (2013), India (2014), Finland (2015), Netherlands (2015) ...
  - Media attention promotes policy attention
  - Policy learning from examples around the world
- Exponential increase in organised basic income movement
- **Basic income pilots are a political compromise between doing nothing and implementing a (radical?) policy idea**

# Why conduct a basic income pilot?

- **Scientific field experiment:** examining actual behaviour under a basic income regime through a controlled experiment
- **Implementation trial:** field-testing the machinery to discover and resolve practical problems before scaling up (trial-and-error)
- **Political demonstration:** advancing the policy agenda by ...
  - raising awareness amongst key stakeholders/general public
  - keeping open a window of opportunity
  - building a broad political coalition “en route”
  - overcoming objections by demonstrating basic income “works”

# Basic income pilots on a continuum



# Politics Matters! The rabbit-in-the-hat principle

- The magician pulls out of the hat only what she put in beforehand
- Similarly, pilot results will depend on prior design and investment
- The first rule of basic income pilots: secure sufficient resources, expertise and especially political commitment



# Four scientific challenges to basic income experiments

- ▶ Time frame: some behavioural effects only materialise over time or through anticipation of long-term treatment
- ▶ Selection/size of treatment/control groups: RCT vs. prioritizing?
- ▶ Experiment with environment variables, not just populations
  - ▶ Unique feature of field experiments is its ability to take into account complexity of the real world (context)
- ▶ Selection of effects and measurement indicators
  - ▶ Avoid overly narrow focus (labour market effects) and include broad social effects (e.g., health impact?)



# Basic income and the health impact agenda

- Social determinants of health (SDH) strongly suggest poverty negatively affects health (morbidity/mortality) (Forget on Mincome)
- Studies shows effect of income on health but so far little understanding of **precise mechanisms**, which we need to decide between competing income support policies
- Possible mechanisms for basic income/health impact:
  1. Pure income effect (purchasing power)
  2. Security effect (future income)
  3. No-stigma effect (dignity, social status)
  4. Equality effect (reduced economic disparity)
  5. Opportunity effect (pathway to upwards social mobility)



# Four political challenges to basic income experiments

- Ongoing political commitment: between preparation, experiment and evaluation a lot can happen politically (new priorities, new government)
- Political priorities intervene: ex post defunding of some evaluation components (cf. NIT experiments in USA/Canada), reducing scope
- Long time frame is politically inopportune: how to deal with pressure to release early results? (not just government, advocates as well)
- Qualified results make for difficult evidence-based policy: experiment may not give us a simple recommendation, political interpretation unavoidable

Gracias!

Comments always welcome at  
[jurgen.dewispelaere@gmail.com](mailto:jurgen.dewispelaere@gmail.com)

Download my research at  
[https://uta-fi.academia.edu/  
JurgenDeWispelaere](https://uta-fi.academia.edu/JurgenDeWispelaere)

