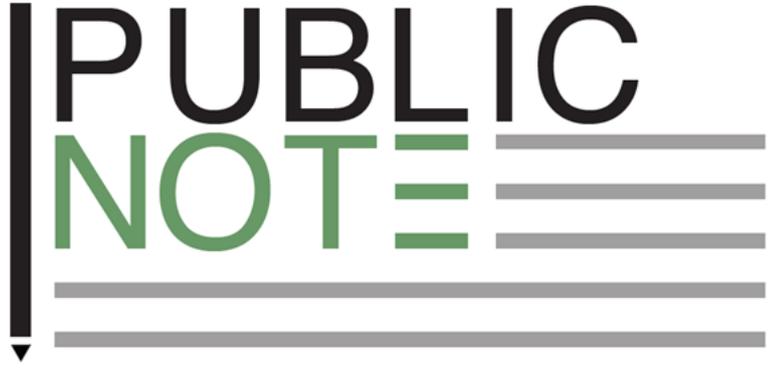# Policy diffusion and euthanasia policy in the COVID era: on the potential ripple effects of the Dutch Completed Life debate

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The novel coronavirus has touched every facet of the European community, including the fight to legalize practices like euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. While activists in many nations push for legalization, some in the Netherlands – where such practices have long been allowed – are asking for more. Specifically, the Dutch "Completed Life" movement argues that anyone over a certain age should have access to euthanasia. This paper applies the concept of *policy diffusion* to demonstrate how such a local movement could have global effects, and to question the responsibilities that such large-scale impacts entail.

Lessons for practice:

- Dutch politicians, policymakers and activists in support of legalizing euthanasia for more general use should connect with peers in other nations to understand how passage of a Completed Life bill would affect other national end-of-life policy debates.
- The above parties should also consider slowing efforts to push their position until after the COVID-19 pandemic has passed, given potential negative ramifications in a fragile political climate.

Introduction

When COVID-19 began, nations closed their borders to avert undue suffering; for some terminally ill patients, however, the effect was exactly the opposite. Trapped in countries with restrictive end-of-life policies, many found themselves unable to travel abroad to end life on their own terms (Cunningham, 2020). Lack of local access to services like euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide during COVID-19 has galvanized activists fighting for legalization in a number of nations. Pushing back, opposition groups have argued that permitting such services would fly in the face of an already colossal loss of life (Euronews, 2021). Despite this, legalization bills have passed in nations like Spain and New Zealand, indicating that the "new normal" for euthanasia policy post-COVID might be more permissive (BBC, 2021, Jha, 2020). The situation remains delicate, however, and in the unprecedented circumstances of a global pandemic, the risk of the tide turning against legalization efforts seems all too real.

One factor that could swing the pendulum against more liberal end-of-life policies comes from the Netherlands, where the practice was first legalized. There, the debate has moved beyond arguing for euthanasia to be available to the terminally ill; now, some are pushing for it to be provided to anyone over a certain age who has decided that they are finished living (NL Times, 2020). Unsurprisingly, the so-called "Completed Life" movement is controversial, and this paper does not aim to argue either side. Rather, this note hopes to point towards the wider implications that such a policy could have, while sparking debate about the responsibilities that local activists have on the global stage. To illustrate these points creatively, an extended metaphor will be employed, based on something that the Dutch – with their long history of taming the sea – may appreciate: fluid dynamics.

What are the wider implications of the "Completed Life" movement? Which responsibilities have local activists on the global stage?

Policy diffusion and ripples

Imagine the world as a calm pool of water on a windless day. If a stone is dropped in one part, it generates ripples, which carry the energy of that dropped stone outward in concentric circles. If you drop a second, simultaneous stone, the ripples mix, adding their energy to each other. In some cases, the collision of waves is additive, amplifying their combined height in a process called *constructive interference*. In others, the ripples crash into and destroy each other, cancelled out by the phenomenon of *destructive interference*.

This image serves as a simplistic but useful metaphor for the process of policy diffusion. According to Braun et al. (2007), policy diffusion is "a process in which policy choices are interdependent," wherein decisions in one place impact the choices made in others. In the metaphor of the pool, the stones are national policies, implemented in their own plots of water. The ripples send energy from one nation to another, creating cross-border effects that impact policy debates elsewhere.

To offer a concrete example, it is helpful to examine the effects of a very large stone, like the Dutch drive to legalize euthanasia at the turn of the century. Much like in the metaphorical pool, the ripples from this stone were not confined to one section of water; they traveled to neighboring Belgium and Germany, where they mingled with foreign waves. In Belgium, the result was constructive: euthanasia's legalization to the north offered Belgian politicians a path to follow, and mere months after the Hague first approved the practice, Brussels followed suit (Judo, 2013; Cohen-Almagore, 2009). In Germany, Dutch legalization efforts had

a more destructive effect, inflaming local opposition to euthanasia and driving Germany's religious leaders to effectively lobby against legalization efforts (Deutsche Welle, n.d).

Why did the same Dutch ripples have such different effects in nations that share a border? To extend the metaphor, whether two waves collide in a constructive or destructive manner depends on how aligned those waves are. Historically, for example, the Dutch share more meaningful similarities with the Belgians than they do with the Germans; both of the former were occupied by the latter during the Second World War, when the Nazi euphemism for forced extermination was *Euthanasie* (Horn, 2013). Historical institutionalists, who argue that today's policies and practices are indelibly influenced by past events (Hall & Taylor, 1996), would argue that the legacy of WWII hangs heavy over the euthanasia debate in all three nations, allowing its development in the Low Countries, and stifling it in Germany. Others could argue that other factors – like cultural differences or the effects of individuals within these institutions – are behind the differing policy responses to Dutch legalization. Ultimately, it's difficult to prove causation, or to rank factors in terms of importance, and this likewise makes the effects of policy diffusion difficult to predict. Put in other words, it's hard to know how a stone's impact in one corner will affect other parts of the pool until the stone has already been dropped.

Debating Completed Lives with caution

Though a dramatic oversimplification, the above discussion serves as a reminder of how local policies can have global effects. These effects are difficult to predict in the present moment, when COVID-19 has created an exogenous shock that is disrupting institutional arrangements around the globe. Though an argument could be made that the pandemic is pushing many towards less restrictive end-of-life policies, the situation is subject to change. The controversial "Completed Life" debate – which, in the eyes of some, represents the end of the "slippery slope" that anti-euthanasia movements warn against (Pappas, 1996) – is a massive stone. If dropped, it will send out large ripples that, more likely than not, will be destructive to other nations' legalization efforts.

With this in mind, three points should be stressed. Firstly, given the global effects of local policies, pro-euthanasia activists everywhere should think bigger, strengthening ties with likeminded movements in other nations to coordinate their efforts and weigh the effects that legalization in one nation may have on others. Second, as long as this coordination is lacking, members of the Completed Life movement should await the end of the pandemic to push their agenda. Passing their legislation in such a tumultuous climate could create ripples that do more harm globally than good locally, which would run contrary to their goal of ensuring more deaths with dignity. Finally, the field of policy diffusion – as the study of ripples and their effects – remains a rewarding field of study and, at risk of overstretching the metaphor, the authors of this note encourage others to dive in.

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> Passing Completed Life legislation in a tumultuous climate could create ripples that do more harm globally than good locally

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