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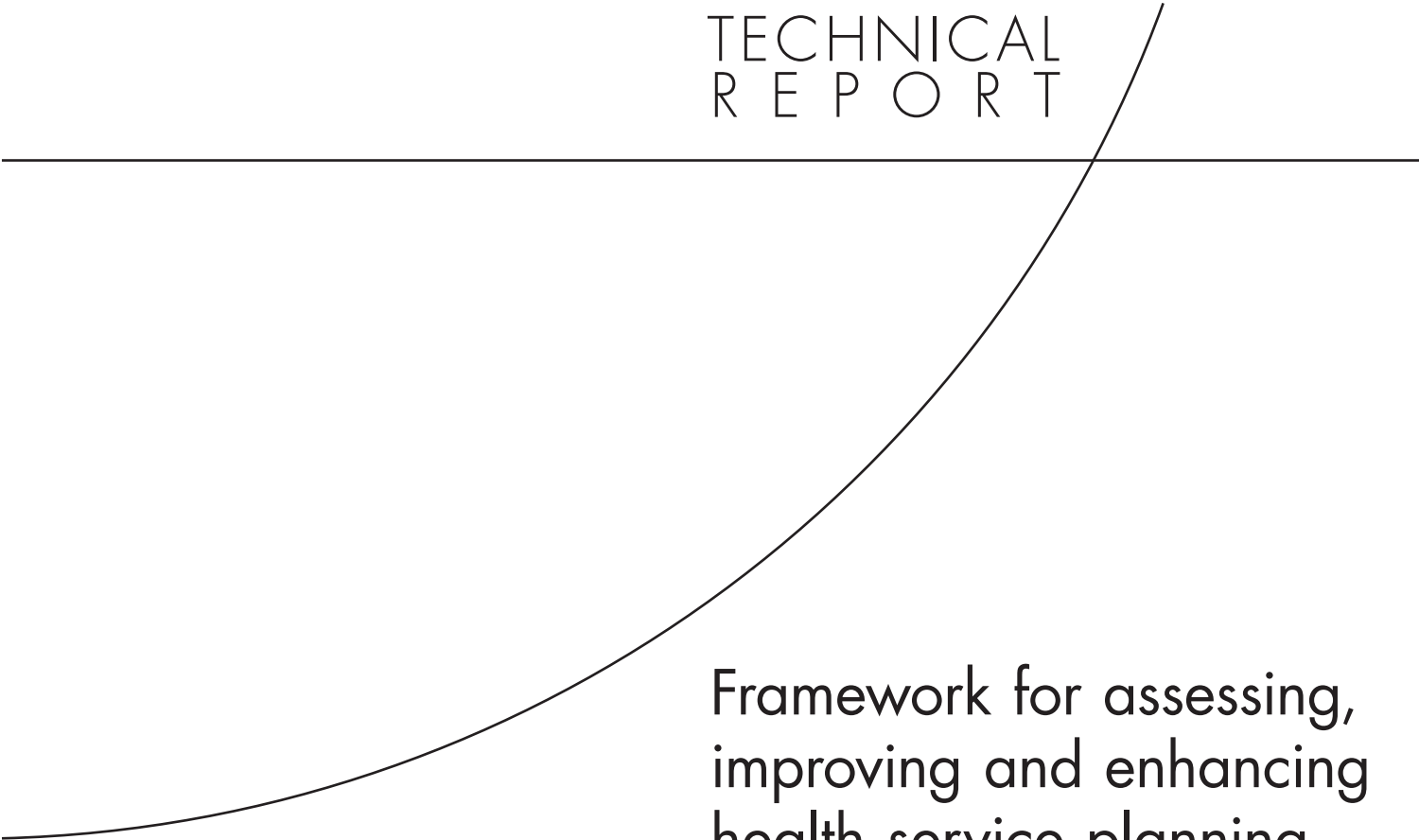
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Framework for assessing, improving and enhancing health service planning

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Executive summary

Healthcare planning is widely seen as a core component of health system governance. It forms a key instrument for decision makers to influence and direct health service provision, a function which is likely to become ever more important as health systems in Europe are facing increasingly complex challenges that demand innovative solutions. How this is achieved best and in what circumstances remains however uncertain, given the variety of approaches adopted in different settings, often reflecting the wider institutional, legislative and political framework of a country's health system. However, there is considerable potential for policy learning across countries from the diversity of healthcare planning approaches in Europe and elsewhere. This report aims to contribute to this process through developing and validating a framework for assessing, improving and enhancing healthcare planning and so providing a tool for analysts and decision makers seeking to understand whether the approach of planning taken in a given setting supports its goals and how the approach can be improved in future.

We identified a set of criteria guided by an understanding of healthcare planning as an explicit process of defining objectives and goals and to devise strategies of how these objectives can be met. The criteria of the framework developed here can broadly be classified into three themes:

- “Vision” encapsulates the goals and objectives of healthcare planning, which should be aligned with the overall goals of health system governance, reflected in all areas of the healthcare system, and taking a long-term perspective.
- “Governance” refers to the role of decision makers and implementers to whom clear responsibilities should be assigned, the alignment of planning with sanctions and incentives that support implementation, the balance involved of relevant stakeholders, and the consistency of the approach at different levels of planning.
- “Intelligence” highlights the importance of the availability and appropriate analysis of relevant data, the existence of sufficient analytical and administrative capacity for these tasks to be carried out, and the need for continuous monitoring and measuring of progress against set objectives.

We tested our criteria empirically through an in-depth analysis of four countries, using a case study approach. Countries were selected to provide a range of types of government and healthcare system: Germany, Austria, Canada (Ontario) and New Zealand.

The analysis provides important insights into how different systems approach healthcare planning, identifying common challenges, but also differences highlighting the very

contextual nature within which healthcare planning as an instrument to directing health service provision sits. Thus, it will be important to understand the role and power of actors as powerful stakeholder interests are likely to undermine effective planning if there are no mechanisms in place that allow for consensus building and establish lines of accountability for implementation. Likewise, the most sophisticated planning tool is likely to be of little value if it is not supported by an appropriate governance structure.

Planning is also affected by a wider socio-economic context. Broad political goals, such as ensuring economic sustainability, have to be considered and weighed against the goals of healthcare planning. Given that different groups (e.g. providers, payers, patients) are affected by planning in different ways, a transparent, evidence-based and goal-oriented approach is desirable.

The framework developed here presents a first step towards developing a tool for assessing healthcare planning in high income countries. Further validation through applying it to a wider range of countries is desirable.