

Autism and China's 15th Five-Year Plan

- Three-Part Series -

Part 1.

A National Focus on Disability and Autism Framed Within Principles of 'High Quality' Development

Summary

China's successive Five-Year Plans have been a prominent feature of the nation's social and economic development since 1953.

The *15th Five-Year Plan (2026 – 2030)* is considered to be a 'grand blueprint' for China's continued era of modernisation. It was approved by the National People's Congress in March 2026 following the usual period of planning commencing in 2023.

The new *Five-Year Plan* emphasises a high-quality path to modernisation of the Chinese Nation, pointing to the stated priority of better balancing pure economic growth objectives against the livelihoods and development of people. It recognises unbalanced and insufficient development in some areas, acknowledging and seeking to address weaknesses and shortfalls in overall livelihood protection.

The Five-Year Plan emphasises self-reliance in the reform process and places strong accountabilities on provinces and cities to take action in line with the plan.

Through the plan, China aims to double per capita GDP by 2035 compared to 2020. This would see it reach the per capita GDP level of moderately developed countries by 2035. This moderated development trajectory reflects the increasing emphasis on 'balanced' and 'high quality' development – i.e. emphasis on outcomes for people.

Reflecting this approach to development, the *15th Five-Year Plan* brings an increased emphasis on health and disability. Choreographed with this is the new *15th Five-Year Plan for the Protection and Development of Persons with Disabilities* issued in July 2026 by the *State Council Working Committee on Disability Affairs*.

This builds upon the *National Action Plan for Promoting Care for Children with Autism (2024-2028)* issued in 2024 by the *China Disabled Persons*

Federation, the Ministry for Health, the Ministry for Education and other key organisations reflecting the apparatus of policy and implementation in China.

Outcomes for People: Inclusive Development Centered on the Accountability of Regions and Cities to Take Action

It's important to note that whilst China's *Five-Year Plans* represent the blueprint mechanism for central planning, there is at the same time a strong emphasis on local empowerment and accountability to execute against the national planning prescriptions. Combining this knowledge of 'how things get done' in China with a deeper understanding of the greater national emphasis on 'inclusive development' helps us to understand the role to be played by cities such as the Hong Kong SAR when it comes to priorities such as disability support and Autism.

Promoting 'Interconnected Regional Development'

The *15th Five-Year Plan* states the importance of increasing inter-connectedness within diverse but contiguous urban regions and corridors to achieve development objectives (urban agglomeration). For these regions it emphasises integration, institutional coordination and widened circles of economic circulation centred on mutual benefit.

Priority regions to deliver on this heightened level of 'world-class' inter-connectedness are listed as:

- the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region;
- the Yangtze River Delta, and
- the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area

The *Five-Year Plan* asks economically significant provinces to shoulder 'heavy responsibilities' when it comes to reform and leading by example.

Accelerating the 'Construction of a Healthy China'

The *15th Five-Year Plan* asks for a 'health-first development strategy' through action to improve health promotion policy and institutional systems. Signaling a modernised and people-centered approach to community health, the plan calls for a shift from a 'treatment-centered' approach toward a 'health-centered' approach. This paves the way for a drive toward 'fair, accessible, systematic, and continuous health services'. In this way, we can see China embracing a shift to an overarching emphasis on the fundamental health rights of people (e.g. awareness and access) over simply bolstering the mechanisms and processes of treatment alone.

Inclusive Development Theme – A Focus on the ‘Development Rights and Interests of All Groups’

The *15th Five-Year Plan* prioritises inclusive development emphasising gender equality, the care and protection of minors, youth development, support for veterans and capacity building for the protection and development of persons with disabilities.

Enhancing the Capacity for the Protection and Development of Persons with Disabilities

Specifically, the plan aims to improve the social security system and the care and service system for persons with disabilities. It states a priority to ‘promote the comprehensive development of the cause of persons with disabilities’, focusing on:

- social protection of people with multiple and severe disabilities;
- improvement to subsidy standards for people with disabilities who are in financial difficulty;
- bolstering rehabilitation for children with disabilities including community based programs for persons with intellectual disabilities;
- strengthened programs to enable employment for persons with disabilities;
- deep advancement of the use of science and technology to assist persons with disabilities (科技助残); and
- further construction of an accessible and barrier-free environment in public facilities, information exchange, and social services.

Next – A Focus on Autism

Through policy evolution in China – based on the principles of ‘high-quality development’ now manifested in the *15th Five-Year Plan* – we can see a clear and granular policy progressiveness when it comes to the livelihoods of people, health and disability. We can also see and should take note of the renewed emphasis on local empowerment and execution, in line with the prescribed national plan along with an emphasis on inter-connectedness and integration in major city clusters such as the Greater Bay Area (GBA).

In **Part 2 of this series** we will explore the **accelerated development of national policy and action planning on Autism in China** in line with the *15th Five-Year Plan*.

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