

Developmental Systems Theory and Ecosystem Theory for Youth Development in Nepal

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Abstract

Nepal's growing youth population, which constitutes 40.3% of the nation, presents both significant opportunities and challenges, including widespread unemployment, social exclusion, and limited access to quality education or leadership roles. This study aimed to understand how Developmental Systems Theory (DST) and Ecosystem Theory can inform effective and equitable youth development programs within Nepal's specific socio-cultural context. A scoping review of research articles, peer-reviewed articles, government reports, and program evaluations published between 2000 and 2025 was conducted as the methodology. The review revealed incoherent policy, poor coordination, and deep-seated caste, gender, and spatial inequalities that significantly impede youth development. It was found that DST explains youth development through adaptive, two-way transactions with the environment, recognizing youth as co-creators of their contexts. Ecosystem Theory, developed by Bronfenbrenner, examines the various levels of influence on an adolescent's life, ranging from immediate settings such as family and school (microsystem) to

broader cultural policies (macrosystem). The synergistic integration of DST and Ecosystem Theory offers a robust, science-based foundation for understanding youth development in complex societies like Nepal. This combined framework supports the development of inclusive, resilient, and context-specific interventions that are both individually empowering and structurally transformative, leveraging new opportunities presented by federal restructuring and digital innovation to scale youth voice and civic action. The research ultimately validates a two-edged approach combining DST and Ecosystem Theory to foster a more inclusive, equitable, and resilient state for Nepal's youth.

Keywords: Developmental systems theory, Ecosystem theory, Nepalese youth, Young population, Youth development

Introduction

Nepal possesses a huge, growing young population. The census has revealed that 40.3 percent of the nation is between the ages of 16-40 years, and the youth are the nation's most powerful sources of social as well as economic development ([National Statistics Office](#), 2021). The population trend is a fine chance for transformation, but it consists of extremely serious issues. While young people have played a role in innovation, political participation, and economic growth, they too face numerous challenges such as inadequate access to good education, unemployment, displacement, and poor representation in the government. These realities point to an evident need for youth development beyond minimum services. The determinants of unemployment among Nepalese youth are structural inefficiencies in the labor market, limitations of GDP growth in order to generate employment, and remittance dependency (Khatri et al., 2025). Additionally, illiteracy, particularly among women, is a significant limitation with high rates of illiteracy and dropouts due to socioeconomic as well as caste disparities (Acharya et al., 2020). Therefore, there must be a more comprehensive, responsive, and youth-centered development approach implemented to guide Nepal toward national inclusive development.

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is one of the models that redefine the problem as the assets of youth rather than youth problems. PYD also differs from deficit models in placing a focus on young people's assets and perceiving them as capable of making positive contributions to their

communities (Lerner et al., 2005). This is also reaffirmed in YUWA's 2022 Annual Report, which focuses on youth initiatives like the Youth Activist Leadership Councils that were set up in Kathmandu and Rupandehi to organize marginalized youths into politics and civil society, and specifically cultivate leadership and participation among girls and other youths (YUWA, 2022). However, such platforms are isolated in terms of scale and confined to the wider national policy space. In addition, they do not often incorporate the theoretical models necessary to understand the larger systems that shape youth development. Therefore, the full potential of PYD is not being leveraged. In addition, global systematic reviews demonstrate that PYD interventions significantly boost outcomes among vulnerable youth in low- and middle-income nations (Chowa et al., 2023), and vocational training interventions in Nepal have achieved significant employment outcomes when infused within strength-based models (Chakravarty et al., 2020).

To tap the full dividend of Nepal's youth population, development interventions have to be conceptualized in the language of scientific theories that capture both the individual and the environmental levels of development. Among the numerous theoretical models available with which to work, Developmental Systems Theory (DST) and Ecosystem Theory are most feasible to utilize for use in Nepal. DST explains youth development through adaptive, two-way transactions with the environment, with regard for flexibility and accommodation (Overton, 2015).

Ecosystem Theory, discussed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), traces different levels of influence on an adolescent's life from school and family to government policy and cultural assumptions. The systems are complementary in the sense that they connect individual change to structuring larger systems. As a combination, they offer a fine and science-based foundation for comprehending youth development in complex societies like Nepal. The most recent data from Nepal again confirms that youth programs based on systems that include individual and environmental interventions increase youth resilience and civic engagement (Johnson & West, 2022), and coordinated vocational training and industry-linked Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs boost labor market engagement and social inclusion (Bhattarai, 2019). Such an argument consequently validates a two-edged approach combining DST and Ecosystem Theory to benefit policymakers as well as practitioners in order to develop adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable youth policy. The intersection of DST and Ecosystem Theory is particularly timely for Nepal, as a federal nation, more digitally integrated, and an SDG

signatory. Online platforms such as the UNICEF Annual Report 2023 facilitated youth participation through the ability to comment and poll at a large scale. UNICEF approximates that 36.6 million youths were mobilized across the U Report and other online media globally, attesting to technology's capacity to scale up youth voice and facilitate civic action (UNICEF, 2024).

Structural barriers such as casteism, rural–urban dualism, and gendered barriers continue to deny education, employment, and civic space to young Nepalese. Evidence indicates that *Dalit* and *Janajati* youth with constitutionally guaranteed protections remain systematically excluded from labor and education markets, receiving much lower wages than those of upper castes (Dulal et al., 2021). This has to be dealt with through evidence-based, nuanced, multidimensional interventions, not an across-the-board approach. In considering youth development through the twin lenses of DST and exosystemic infrastructure, Nepal is able to foster the core competence, confidence, character, connection, and care value strengths that are the foundation for people's development and democratic development trajectories.

The study intends to explore how unification between DST and Ecosystem Theory can strengthen youth development strategies for Nepal. It seeks to guide inclusive, culture-sensitive, and system-oriented policy and programs for Nepali youth.

Methods and Procedure

A scoping review, as per Peters et al. (2015), was employed to conduct research in searching for applications of DST and Ecosystem Theory in youth development policy, programs, and practice in Nepal from 2000 to 2025. A targeted search of academic journals like Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, and JSTOR by using select keywords like "Youth Development in Nepal," "Developmental Systems Theory," "Ecosystem Theory," "Nepal Youth Policy," and "Adolescent Participation Nepal" was performed."

Grey literature, like government reports, policy briefs, and program evaluations from INGOs and NGOs, was also procured manually. Reports with inclusion criteria included youth reports between ages 16-40 years, specific to Nepal or comparable low- and middle-income countries. Studies that were not on DST or Ecosystem Theory, not specific to Nepal, outside the youth age range, older, or duplicates were excluded. 147 records were collected (133 from databases and 14 from grey sources), and upon the removal of duplicates using EndNote, 126

records were screened. Upon abstract screening, thus excluding 74 irrelevant studies. Then, 52 full-text articles were screened, and 11 further papers were excluded for not being directly applicable. This left 41 articles to final consideration.

Data were extracted in a structured format consisting of author, year, region, focus area, and summary. Findings were synthesized to view how DST and Ecosystem Theory are being applied in real programs and how these theories can be applied to inform inclusive and responsive youth development in Nepal.

Theoretical Framework

Two complementary theoretical frameworks guide an integrated youth development model for Nepal: DST and Ecosystem Theory. The convergence of these two theories delivers a solid scientific and practical basis for building culturally informed, youth-led policy and interventions.

Developmental Systems Theory (DST)

DST conceptualizes youth development as a flexible, life-course process governed by ongoing transactions between persons and worlds. The dominant idea is flexible, or changeability over a lifespan, most visibly in adolescence. DST eschews linear or deterministic systems, instead requiring developmental processes governed by two-way transactions between youth and their worlds. These processes are dynamic in the sense that youth build their contexts, and are built by them in a reciprocally bidirectional process (Lerner et al., 2011). It is for this reason that DST is particularly relevant to countries such as Nepal, whose extremely rapid social, political, and technological change generates rich developmental contexts. A proper critique of DST emphasizes its application towards the evolution of youth policy ideas aimed at facilitating adaptability and system change (Overton, 2015).

This emphasis on youth as change agents can be organically merged with Nepal's youth-driven grassroots movement. DST-led initiatives put young people as co-creators rather than passive recipients. For example, youths have been actively involved from Tole-level consultations to ward assemblies setting development agendas, rather than merely responding to them (Pyakurel, 2023). Inclusive processes that involve their voices construct systemic responsiveness and trust. These inclusive solutions are the result of youth development programs addressing real needs and

priorities at the local level. Particularly in Nepal, where the country is transforming so rapidly, co-designed solutions at the local government level also lead to youth empowerment and more sustainable, effective, and inclusive results.

Ecosystem Theory

Ecosystem Theory, which Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed, defines human development as being composed of interrelated systems: microsystem (school and home), mesosystem (interplay between microsystems), exosystem (the groups with which the individual is not directly interacting), macrosystem (cultural beliefs and policies), and chronosystem (changes over time). Nepal demonstrates how the ecological model explains that caste values restrict education and employment (macrosystem), yet labor migration alters domestic life (exosystem). Recognizing these multi-level influences is crucial to understanding how youth lives and resilience are shaped by broader social structures (Ungar et al., 2023)

The strength of Ecosystem Theory lies in its ability to map multidimensional impacts in naturalistic settings. For example, Nepal's "One School One Nurse" project improved the well-being of children (microsystem), fostered school–family health cooperation (mesosystem), and operates on provincial policies of health (exosystem). Importantly, migration because of limited employment opportunities across regions also affects not only the migrants but also the families in the migration and local economies of the sending regions: "Exosystem and macrosystem forces come together at points that catalyze individual growth" (Sharma et al., 2025). An all-inclusive framework is required to formulate policies regarding the nuanced reality of Nepali youth.

Integration of DST and Ecosystem Theory

Whereas DST shows how youth evolve through dynamic change, Ecosystem Theory addresses where that change is occurring in a stratified system of impact. DST is essential to grasp youth flexibility and responsiveness, but lacks a significant spatial contextual emphasis. Ecosystem Theory takes up that challenge by drawing on the cultural and structural ecologies that may enable or constrain youth potential (McLeod, 2023). They provide a combined framework that values youth as agents situated within cultural norms, policy contexts, and power dynamics. In countries like Nepal that experience rapid system change with constitutionally rooted

inequalities (Vandell et al., 2020), the combined framework provides a more sophisticated template for policy to meet the promise of people and equitable system conditions.

The use of this integrated approach renders youth programming and policy more dutiful, scaled, and culture-based. Agency emphasis in DST can guide leadership development, and Ecosystem Theory ensures interventions address caste-based exclusion, gender constraints, or regional inequities head-on. They work synergistically to create interventions that are both individually empowering and structurally transformative. The National Academies' out-of-school time program model illustrates how OST programs target individual development (microsystem), construct relation networks (mesosystem), and are guided by more universal policy environments (macrosystem), showing system synergy (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2025). Such a two-nodal approach supports inclusive strategies grounded in cultural facts and systemic justice.

Results and Discussion

Contextual Landscape of Nepalese Youth

Nepal's youth population (16–40 years) constitutes approximately 40.3% of the total population and represents a gigantic "youth bulge" full of economic potential. But youths are mostly unemployed, brought about by education and labor market demand mismatch, outdated curricula, and limited vocational training (NSO, 2021). They are also in need of reliable information to prepare them for a safe and productive life, because many young people in Nepal have a low sexual and reproductive health and rights status (Aryal et al., 2025; Aryal et al., 2023). Young people in Kathmandu Valley suffer systemically from exclusion from employment, including skill mismatches, stigma of vocationalism as a career, and lack of entrepreneurial support (Sharma & Paudel, 2023). Evidence of this further calls for education reform and alignment with youth-focused labor markets. Cultural and structural inequality also decides the experience of Nepali youth. Rural adolescent girls would likely have restricted access to mobility and education due to a deeply rooted patriarchal culture. Neupane (2018) finds that completion of secondary school for girls and *Dalit/Janajati* students is lower than that of high caste students due to domestic work, low parental education, and the caste mix of the area. These inequalities reinforce the need for youth development models that are inclusive, equity-oriented, and context-specific.

Federal reshaping and ICT development are opening up new opportunities for youth inclusion. The Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT) has enhanced access to TVET across the country, linking training to industry needs and employment outcomes important element of youth skills formation (Bhattarai, 2019). At the same time, young people's digital penetration has quickened, with growing numbers of young people using information and civic engagement through mobile media. Such trends offer potential for more active, participatory, and locally responsive youth practice if nurtured through balanced policy and institutional coordination.

Application of Theories to Nepalese Youth Development

Using DST and Ecosystem Theory at the same time gives youth programs in Nepal a sense of what they can do. Used as a package, both can specify the structural and dynamic forces that shape young people's experiences, development trajectories, and civic involvement. The following describes how these models can be used to inform Nepal's actual interventions, community programs, and country-level plans for youth empowerment.

Youth and Context Interaction in Nepal Using DST

DST emphasizes dynamic, bidirectional relationships between youth and their ecosystems, a concept demonstrated by Nepal's Healthy Transitions program. That multi-component intervention engaged adolescent girls, families, community leaders, and health facilities and yielded enhanced knowledge in reproductive health (Adhikari et al., 2025), gender-equitable attitude change, and enhanced care-seeking behaviors, recording youth agency driving more extensive systems. At the same time, civic education programs in Rolpa via awareness campaigns amongst adolescents within schools promoted girls' school attendance as well as community participation, facilitating DST's development plasticity idea (Bhandari et al., 2023).

DST also measures regional and socioeconomic variation in Nepali youth outcomes. Estimates from a large-scale randomized experiment of vocational training revealed that the intervention produced large 10 to 31 percentage point increases in non-farm work, with larger effects among women in home-based enterprise (Chakravarty et al., 2020). Another mixed-methods study of Technical Education and Vocational Training (TVET) in Nepal proved that

technically pertinent training, even though closer to the local market demand, resulted in long-term employment of youths for Morang and Sunsari districts (Bajracharya & Paudel, 2021). The evidence agrees with DST's premise that teenagers thrive if personal agency and setting support overlap.

Understanding Nepalese Youth through the Ecosystem Framework

Bronfenbrenner's Ecosystem Theory is a model of intricate Nepalese teenage development. Stability and quality in the family at the microsystem level are the main determining factors of the teenager's emotional life and education. Teenagers from stable families, residing in towns, according to the 2021 census of Nepal, tend to continue in secondary school (NSO, 2021). A Chitwan cross-sectional study reported that 61.4% of adolescent girls are absent from school during menstruation, and poor facilities and cultural stigma were the leading reasons cited for how school climate and microsystem conditions impact attendance and self-reported esteem (Khanal et al., 2023).

Good coordination between community institutions at the mesosystem level strengthens positive effects. For instance, a menstrual hygiene education intervention in Gorkha District helped improve school attendance by adolescent girls through cultural stigma reduction and WASH infrastructure development (Rai, 2024). In another instance, in Surkhet, it was revealed that girls exposed to formal menstrual health education and parental involvement had significantly higher knowledge and hygiene behavior than girls without such interventions, demonstrating that family, school community involvement through concerted efforts reinforces behavior change (Bhedi & Khanal, 2024).

Youth Development Models in the Nepalese Context

Nepal embraced several youth development models, such as Lerner's 5 Cs, the 40 Developmental Assets model, and UNICEF's Adolescent Development and Participation (ADAP) platform. A limited amount of Nepali-specific research is available, yet worldwide evidence supports their application in comparable contexts (Catalano et al., 2004). Systematic investigation confirms that the 5 Cs model significantly boosts academic motivation and psychosocial development in disadvantaged South Asian youth (Chaudhary et al., 2021). Similarly, the 40

Developmental Assets framework, internationally acclaimed for its focus on inner and outer assets, has been linked with greater civic participation and social skills (Benson, 2003). There is high theoretical congruence with Nepali practices like *guthi* and *ashta* that have their probable incorporation in local adaptation (Subedi & Shrestha, 2024).

With UNICEF's ADAP, 2021 programming, particularly online platforms like U Report, impact has been demonstrated in low- and middle-income nations by engaging youth in health, education, and rights discussions. Large-scale South Asia-wide research identified civic participation, information exposure, and policy reaction as enhanced when coupled with outreach on the community level (Liu, 2024). Despite these successes, critics note economic empowerment remains under-emphasized, especially in rural communities. Synthesis under a unified comprehensive model that has ties in DST and Ecosystem Theory might offer culturally sensitive, context-dependent models merging personal agency and structural incorporation.

Gaps and Opportunities in Policy and Practice

In spite of increasing institutional focus, the youth policy space in Nepal is fragmented and under-resourced. Though inter-ministerial coordination is prescribed under the National Youth Policy 2015 (Council of Ministers, 2015), its quality is low, and inter-agency coordination is confined within silos. A 2023 review of the Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation literature in Nepal provides insight into how only 10–15% of youth interventions employ systematic evaluation practices, weakening evidence-based scaling and accountability (Gyawali & Yadav, 2023). Without Indigenous and systemic systems of power, synergy between agencies is lost, and policy coherence is eroded.

Youth development initiatives in Nepal are also stifled by cultural barriers. Evidence is provided that deep-seated gender roles and caste prejudice continue to hinder the participation of youths in education, employment, and civil society. According to the UNFPA annual report, in 2024, only 22% of paid employees in Nepal are women, a reflection of social constraints and asymmetrical economic participation. Additionally, high school dropout studies in Nepal recognize Dalit and Indigenous girls as being disproportionately affected by patriarchal values and institutional discrimination (Dahal et al., 2021). These cultural constraints compromise the

principles of equity inherent within Youth Development models, which amplify disparities within heterogeneous communities.

Nevertheless, new opportunities created by federal restructuring and digital innovation give reason for optimism. The UNDP Nepal Youth Strategy (2018–2022) finds that federalism allowed municipalities to allocate youth-dedicated budgets and legalize local youth councils (UNDP Nepal, 2018). Moreover, UNICEF's Nepal Digital Generation research (2024) finds that 78% of youth now use mobile phones, allowing interactive mechanisms like U Report to solicit feedback, deepen civic discourse, and inform local planning in real time. These trends have the potential to fill systemic gaps when coupled with participatory and context-sensitive design, making youth programming more inclusive, responsive, and accountable province-wide.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

To redefine the youth development landscape in Nepal, there needs to be a shared platform where DST and Ecosystem Theory are brought together to inform policy and program planning. The 2015 National Youth Policy in Nepal calls for the establishment of an inter-ministerial coordination committee within the Ministry of Youth and Sports to reduce policy fragmentation and integrate youth work in ministries (Council of Ministers, 2015). A 2024 public policy forum held by the Policy Research Institute convened several youth stakeholders and gave firm policy recommendations like establishing monitoring systems and enhancing inter-agency coordination (Policy Research Institute, 2024). The integration of DST's plasticity and co-action doctrines encourages versatile programming across different areas, and the application of Ecosystem Theory ensures interventions affect all the various levels from individual and family systems to municipal government, which addresses both structural and personal elements.

In practice, the combined process demands culturally responsive measures and timely youth feedback systems. At a May 2024 public policy forum, the Policy Research Institute convened youth, officials, and NGOs' representatives to feature youth participation in the local government and call for replicable online solutions like U Report to gather opinions at the provincial levels (Policy Research Institute, 2024). Besides, the Youth Fest, particularly the May 2023 Karnali Province Youth Policy Dialogue, underscored that offline and online youth participatory forums enhance back loops of feedback and link local policies to youth (Oxfam in

Nepal, 2023). Targeted DST-based scaling of effective civil society interventions, as well as government-NGO coalitions based on Ecosystem Theory, can scale up effects without undermining cultural integrity. Incorporating these two frameworks into institutions gives a context-specific, scalable structure to offer inclusive youth development in Nepal.

Conclusion

Nepal is at a crossroads, where its youth, numbering over 40 percent of the population, can shape national change or be left behind by disjointed and unequal systems. This study contends that combining DST with Ecosystem Theory provides a science-based, contextually flexible, and culturally authentic model for reimagining youth development in Nepal. Taken together, these theories illuminate how young people not only grow up in, but also make, the worlds around them, worlds profoundly inflected by caste, gender, migration, and political change. By anchoring policies in these mutually informing frameworks and expanding successful, culturally grounded programs through strong inter-sectoral collaboration, Nepal can foster young people who are not just beneficiaries of development, but co-authors of a more inclusive, more equitable, and more resilient state. A local, evidence-based approach to youth empowerment is not just a policy necessity; it is a national necessity.

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