

Bridging the Regional Disparities in Startup Development under the Innovative Startup Act: A Descriptive Phenomenological Study.

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Abstract

This phenomenological study examined how startup founders and institutional actors across selected Philippine regions experienced and made meaning of their access to support under the Innovative Startup Act (Republic Act No. 11337). The study addressed policy, research, and management gaps concerning the concentration of program benefits in the National Capital Region (NCR). Anchored in interpretivism and framed by Krugman's spatial inequality theory, the resource-based view, the entrepreneurial ecosystem model, and institutional theory, the study used a descriptive phenomenological design and the Modified Van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher conducted individual and key-informant interviews with twenty-four participants: twelve founders who received Startup Grant Fund (SGF) or Startup Venture Fund (SVF) financing, and twelve program officers, incubator managers, and policy actors, sampled for maximum regional and ecosystem variation. Twenty themes emerged. Regional inequity was found to arise less from discriminatory program design than from the self-reinforcing concentration of ecosystem density, institutional capacity, and information flow in Metro Manila. Founders experienced formal inclusion alongside experiential distance: decisive barriers were compound and pre-application; the most durable program value — capability, networks, and legitimacy — was invisible to short-term evaluation metrics; and compliance costs fell hardest on the smallest ventures. Participants located genuine equity in sustained institutional presence rather than mere national availability of a program. Correcting regional disparity requires transforming implementation rather than revising the enabling law. The study recommends financial-management interventions addressing allocation, entry cost, appraisal horizon, disbursement design, and post-grant sustainability. Aligned with Sustainable Development Goals 8, 9, and 10, this study contributes an original founder-level, first-person account of regional access to Philippine startup policy, supporting the design of more inclusive innovation ecosystems.

Keywords: Innovative Startup Act; Startup Grant Fund; Startup Venture Fund; startup ecosystem; regional inequality; innovation policy; sustainable development goals; startup development

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1. Introduction

Startups are central to innovation, job creation, and economic growth. In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 11337, the Innovative Startup Act (ISA), was enacted to expand access to funding, mentorship, and regulatory relief for early-stage ventures through instruments such as the Startup Grant Fund (SGF) and the Startup Venture Fund (SVF). Despite this national mandate, program benefits remain heavily concentrated in the National Capital Region (NCR), raising concerns that the law's inclusive intent is not being realized equitably across the archipelago.

Regional inequality in innovation activity is a globally documented structural phenomenon rather than an incidental feature of developing-economy growth. Complex economic activities disproportionately cluster in metropolitan centers, producing self-reinforcing concentration effects that are sometimes efficient and sometimes a correctable policy failure. In the Philippine startup ecosystem, this concentration is clearly visible in the distribution of ISA-funded ventures.

This study addressed a specific research gap: while the literature explains regional disparities and general access barriers well, it offers little first-hand, founder-level evidence tracing how individual ISA beneficiaries and institutional actors in Philippine regions actually experience access, barriers, support, and program effectiveness, and how those experiences translate into fixable features of program design. The study was guided by five research questions concerning (1) regional access to ISA funding, (2) barriers to equitable access, (3) experiences of financial and technical support, (4) perceived program effectiveness, and (5) proposed policy improvements.

The purpose of this study was therefore to generate a founder- and institution-level phenomenological account of regional ISA access and to translate that account, through the lens of financial management, into actionable, evidence-based recommendations aligned with Sustainable Development Goals 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), and 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

2. Literature Review

The reviewed literature clusters around four complementary theoretical traditions, each explaining a distinct dimension of the phenomenon under investigation.

Spatial Inequality Theory. Krugman's (1991) new economic geography argues that increasing returns, labor-market pooling, and knowledge spillovers generate cumulative agglomeration processes that concentrate economic activity in specific locations, creating self-reinforcing core-periphery structures over time. Audretsch and Feldman (1996) show that knowledge spillovers are geographically bounded, so proximity to knowledge-producing institutions substantially increases innovative activity. In this study's framework, spatial inequality functions as a primary input variable shaping a startup's exposure to knowledge networks, capital markets, and institutional support.

Resource-Based View. Barney's (1991) Resource-Based View (RBV) proposes that sustained competitive advantage derives from valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources. Applied to regional startup development, the RBV explains why startups in resource-rich urban environments consistently outperform peripheral counterparts, and clarifies why programs such as the SGF and SVF are intended to redress compounding resource deficits in underserved regions.

Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Model. Isenberg's (2010) ecosystem framework, refined by Stam (2015) and complemented by Cooke's (1992) Regional Innovation Systems theory and Porter's (1990) clustering thesis, conceptualizes the enabling environment for entrepreneurship as a multi-domain system of policy, finance, culture, human capital, infrastructure, and markets whose coherent integration — not any single element — determines ecosystem quality and program effectiveness.

Institutional Theory. North's (1990) foundational work, extended by Wurth et al. (2023), establishes that formal rules and informal norms are the primary determinants of economic performance differences across regions, and that program effectiveness depends on regional administrative capacity, inter-agency coordination, and policy execution rather than on the formal text of the law alone.

Taken together, these four theories have each been tested separately in other countries and contexts, but they have rarely been applied jointly, within a single Philippine study, to examine one national program such as the ISA from spatial, firm-level, ecosystem, and institutional angles simultaneously. Local Philippine evidence, including Bonifacio (2025), indicates that ISA-type programs tend to help unevenly and are hardest to access outside major hubs, but no study had yet used in-depth, first-hand interviews to capture how ISA beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries in non-NCR regions personally experience the program, or tied specific implementation gaps to specific, fixable program features. This study was designed to fill that gap by using all four theories side by side as a single integrated framework, so that spatial, firm-level, ecosystem, and institutional explanations of regional gaps could be examined against the same body of interview evidence. Table 1 summarizes how each theory was integrated into the study's variables and research questions.

Table 1. Theoretical Framework Integration

Theory	Core Claim	Variable in This Study	RQs Addressed
Spatial Inequality Theory (Krugman, 1991)	Cumulative causation concentrates innovation in established hubs; peripheral regions face structural disadvantage	Regional disparity (independent variable)	RQ1
Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991)	Firms with VRIN resources sustain competitive advantage; resource-poor contexts compound disadvantage	Startup resource endowment (mediating variable)	RQ2, RQ4
Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Model (Isenberg, 2010; Stam, 2015)	Multi-domain ecosystem coherence determines startup success; no single element is sufficient	Ecosystem quality (contextual variable)	RQ3, RQ4
Institutional Theory (North, 1990; Wurth et al., 2023)	Formal rules produce variable outcomes depending on regional institutional capacity and informal norms	Program effectiveness (dependent variable)	RQ2, RQ4, RQ5

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual chain linking these structural disparities to eventual policy gaps, which directly informed the study's interview protocol and analytic strategy.

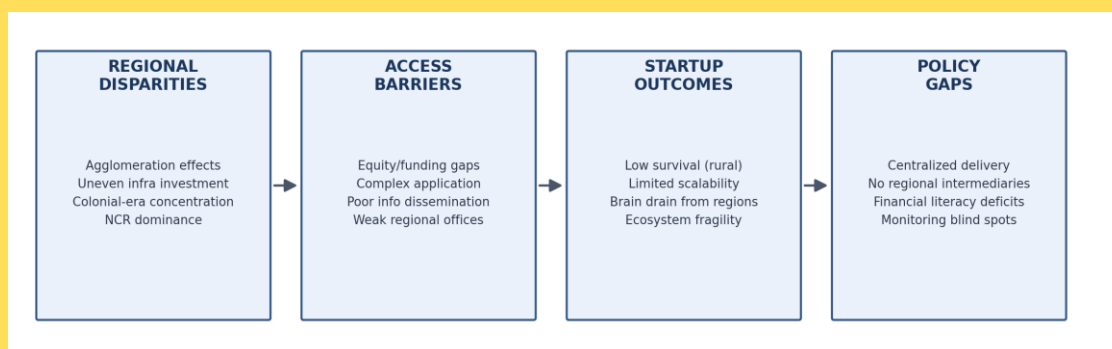


Figure 1. Conceptual Chain: Disparities → Access → Outcomes → Policy Gaps

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study is grounded in the interpretivist philosophical tradition, which holds that social reality is subjective, meaning-laden, and accessible only through systematic interpretation of human experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This stance is expressed through a descriptive phenomenological design following the Modified Van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994), which provides the disciplined analytic procedure for gathering, reducing, and synthesizing participant accounts into a composite description of the shared essence of experience. Descriptive phenomenology was selected over ethnography, grounded theory, case study, and narrative inquiry because the research questions were meaning-centered and experiential rather than theory-generating or culturally interpretive.

3.2 Sampling and Participants

Using maximum variation sampling, the researcher recruited twenty-four participants comprising two groups. Group 1 consisted of twelve startup founders who had received SGF or SVF financing, spanning seven technology-driven sectors (supply chain technology, educational technology, travel technology, biotechnology, legal technology, food technology, and trade technology) and drawn across funded and unfunded statuses and urban and rural regions. Group 2 consisted of twelve institutional key informants — program officers, bureau directors, and incubator or enabler managers — with direct portfolio responsibility for SGF/SVF administration, evaluation, or policy formulation. Across all participants, the researcher documented startup sector and stage, geographic region, years of operation, founder educational background, prior familiarity with government funding programs, and organizational status under RA 11337 as contextual anchors rather than statistical categories.

3.3 Instrumentation and Procedure

Data were generated through semi-structured, in-depth individual and key-informant interviews of 30–45 minutes, guided by an interview protocol that underwent expert content validation (with a computed scale-level content validity index) and pilot testing with three participants who were not included in the main data set. Each session closed with a reflective question inviting participants to add anything unaddressed, consistent with Moustakas's (1994) guidance on honoring participant contribution at closure.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a two-tiered analytic framework. The primary procedure was the Modified Van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994): epoché and bracketing, horizontalization, reduction and elimination, meaning-unit clustering, individual textural and structural descriptions, and synthesis into a composite textural-structural description (the essence), as shown in Figure 2.

Braun and Clarke's (2021) Reflexive Thematic Analysis was applied as a supplementary procedure to identify recurring language patterns and experiential convergences. Coding was inductive and grounded in participant language, beginning with descriptive coding and proceeding to interpretive coding; open, axial, and selective grounded-theory coding procedures were intentionally excluded to preserve methodological consistency with descriptive phenomenology. Codes and transcript segments were documented in a coding manual retained as part of the audit trail, and candidate themes were evaluated for relevance, internal coherence, and distinctiveness before being finalized.

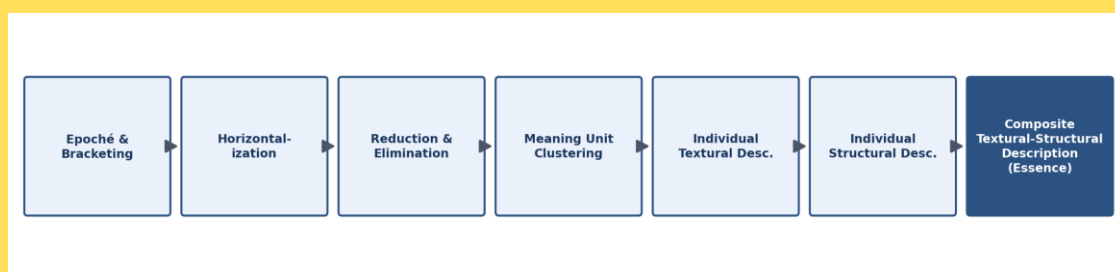


Figure 2. Data Analysis Flowchart (Modified Van Kaam Method)

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, the researcher secured approval from the host institution's Research Ethics Committee (REC), which reviewed the full research protocol, data collection instruments, data management plan, and conflict-of-interest declaration. All participants provided free, prior, and informed consent consistent with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (RA 10173); participation was voluntary, uncoerced, and withdrawable at any stage without penalty. Participant data were treated with strict confidentiality: no real names, institutional affiliations, or geographic identifiers were disclosed, and participants were assigned alphanumeric codes (S-1 to S-12 for founders; K-1 to K-12 for key informants) throughout analysis and reporting.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Rigor

Consistent with Lincoln and Guba (1985), the study established credibility through member checking, prolonged engagement, triangulation across interviews and documentary evidence (RA 11337, its Implementing Rules and Regulations, and agency program reports), and peer debriefing with the thesis adviser and a colleague; dependability and confirmability through an extensive audit trail (transcripts, coding manuals, theme maps, and reflexive journals); and transferability through thick, contextually anchored description of each regional setting and participant group, rather than any claim to statistical generalization.

4. Results

Twenty themes emerged across the five research questions, summarized below by research question and consolidated in Tables 2 through 6.

RQ1. Regional Access to ISA Funding

Program data and participant accounts confirmed that most funded startups are NCR-based, while participation from Luzon outside NCR, the Visayas, and Mindanao remains comparatively low. Participants did not attribute this concentration to policy bias; they traced it to differences in application volume, ecosystem density, intermediary presence, and informational reach. Four themes emerged: the experience of invisible walls (experiential exclusion from a geography many founders cannot access), non-NCR participation and gradual regional expansion (conditional belonging as infrastructure investment slowly translates into participation), the gap between policy promise and structural outcome (institutional sincerity meeting structural inertia), and discovery through networks (information as a social resource distributed by proximity rather than institutional design). Table 2 summarizes the theme structure for Research Question 1.

Table 2. RQ1 Theme Summary — Regional Access to ISA Funding

Theme	Core Meaning Unit	Policy Implication
1a. The Experience of Invisible Walls	Experiential exclusion — the national innovation agenda unfolds in a geography many founders cannot access	Establish regional equity benchmarks; report disaggregated funding data annually
1b. Non-NCR Participation & Gradual Expansion	Conditional belonging — participation expanding but structurally constrained by ecosystem inertia	Sustain TBI investment; pair infrastructure with ecosystem-readiness programs
1c. Promise vs. Possibility Gap	Institutional sincerity meeting structural inertia — reform intent precedes ecosystem reality	Set measurable regional participation targets; report against them publicly
1d. Discovery Through Networks	Information as social resource distributed by proximity, not institutional accessibility	Centralized notification system; proactive regional outreach

RQ2. Barriers to Equitable Access

Four interrelated, cumulative barrier categories were identified: structural and ecosystem constraints (absence of incubators, laboratories, co-working spaces, investors, and mentors in many regions, compounded by talent migration to Metro Manila); information asymmetry (program information that was formally public but did not reach founders outside established networks, with some regional offices themselves initially unaware of ISA initiatives); institutional and administrative constraints (extensive documentation, milestone-based reimbursement, upfront capital requirements, and incubation or registration prerequisites disproportionately burdensome for early-stage and provincial ventures); and psychological and socio-cultural barriers (self-doubt, fear of rejection, intimidation by formal processes, and social preference for stable employment). A founder must typically overcome awareness barriers, then confirm that basic ecosystem infrastructure exists, then navigate a system calibrated to more mature ventures, and finally overcome an internal confidence threshold, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. RQ2 Major Barriers to Equitable Access

Barrier Category	Key Issue	Policy Implication
2a. Structural & Ecosystem	Absence of TBIs, co-working spaces, labs, and mentors in regional areas; talent migration to NCR — foundational infrastructure void prevents startup formation	Invest in regional TBI staffing and co-location hubs
2b. Information Asymmetry	Awareness confined to existing networks; some regional offices themselves unaware — information spreads through proximity, not policy	Establish centralized notification system; targeted regional campaigns
2c. Institutional & Administrative	Extensive documentation, milestone-based reimbursement, incubation prerequisites, minimum registration age — system calibrated to NCR-mature startups screens out early-stage regional applicants	Tiered application pathway; proportional compliance
2d. Psychological & Socio-Cultural	Self-doubt, fear of rejection, opportunity cost of entrepreneurship over stable employment — motivational threshold prevents qualified founders from applying	Early-stage mentorship programs; success-story visibility campaigns

RQ3. Experiences of Financial and Technical Support

Participants described affirmative feedback (support functioning as an enabling encounter and point of ecosystem entry), mixed feedback (support that was bounded — sufficient for a defined research-and-development component but inadequate for sustaining a broader venture), and balancing feedback (support accompanied by high compliance costs and uneven guidance). One key informant quantified this compliance burden directly, noting that roughly ₱500,000 of a ₱5 million grant may be spent on accounting and compliance services rather than on business growth. Table 4 summarizes these support-experience themes.

Table 4. RQ3 Support Experience Theme Summary

Theme	Core Meaning Unit	Policy Implication
3a. Affirmative — Enabling Encounters	Threshold recognition — the national innovation system sees and endorses a founder's work for the first time	Maintain and expand incubator-mediated delivery; leverage institutional legitimacy as program design feature
3b. Mixed — Bounded Enabling	Support valuable within its parameters yet unable to address the full scope of early-stage needs	Expand grant scope to include operational runway; shift technical guidance from compliance to adaptive mentoring
3c. Balancing — Compliance Burden	High compliance costs; lengthy application timelines; limited structured pre-grant guidance	Simplify documentation; introduce proactive guidance from application stage; reduce milestone-based financial exposure

RQ4. Perceived Program Effectiveness

The most enduring reported benefit was capability accumulation — financial management, compliance discipline, proposal writing, and strategic planning — that outlasted the grant period itself. Immediate revenue growth was limited, as commercialization typically lagged behind product development. Participation improved legitimacy, visibility, and ecosystem integration, described by founders as decisive in subsequent funding and partnership discussions. Effectiveness was moderated by regional ecosystem conditions and administrative bottlenecks, and was systematically understated by evaluation windows shorter than the period over which developmental value becomes visible, as detailed in Table 5.

Table 5. RQ4 Effectiveness Dimensions

Theme	Core Meaning Unit	Policy Implication
4a. ISA as Lifeline	Existential continuity — funding as the condition making it possible to remain in the startup journey	Sustain early-stage grant levels; prioritize sectors excluded from private capital
4b. Developmental Compression	ISA collapses the temporal distance between aspiration and actualization; compressed innovation timelines	Report development velocity as an official success metric alongside revenue
4c. Learning as Outcome	Transformative capability — the most durable value is not what was funded but what was built	Include capability-building indicators in program evaluation
4d. Short-Term Metrics vs. Long-Term Value	Temporal inversion — the program creates preconditions for commercial success, not commercial success itself	Shift evaluation to 3–5-year post-grant windows; supplement output metrics with capability indicators

RQ5. Proposed Policy Improvements

Participants proposed reforms across five areas: governance and information flow (harmonized workflows, empowered regional offices, centralized notification); decentralized and data-driven allocation (regional diagnostics, earmarked funding, sector-based allocation); simplified access (low-friction initial applications, smaller entry-level grants, standardized evaluation); localized ecosystem development (aligning innovation calls with regional problem spaces, strengthening technology business incubators (TBIs) as information hubs, embedding startup education in higher education); and financial sustainability and regulatory flexibility (startup-appropriate regulatory treatment, operational subsidies, and structured post-grant transition pathways), summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. RQ5 Theme Overview — Proposed Policy Improvements

Theme	Key Issue	Policy Implication
5a. Governance & Information Flow	National policy intent not consistently translated at regional and municipal levels	Harmonize inter-agency mandates; centralized notification system; LGU focal persons
5b. Decentralized, Data-Driven Allocation	Formally neutral allocation rules produce structurally biased outcomes	Earmark regional budgets; composite scoring adjusted for ecosystem maturity
5c. Simplified Access Mechanisms	Compliance burden calibrated to NCR-mature startups, not early-stage ventures	Tiered, phased applications; low-friction pre-qualification; proportional documentation
5d. Localized Ecosystem Development	Absence of local mentors, TBIs, and problem-oriented support structures	Embed startup support in universities and LGUs; align calls with regional industries
5e. Financial Sustainability & Regulatory Flexibility	Structured beginning with unstructured ending — support stops where continuity is most needed	Startup-specific tax frameworks; bundled non-cash support; clear SGF-to-SVF transition pathway

Figure 3 consolidates all twenty themes under their corresponding research questions, illustrating the overall thematic architecture from which the study's conclusions and recommendations were derived.

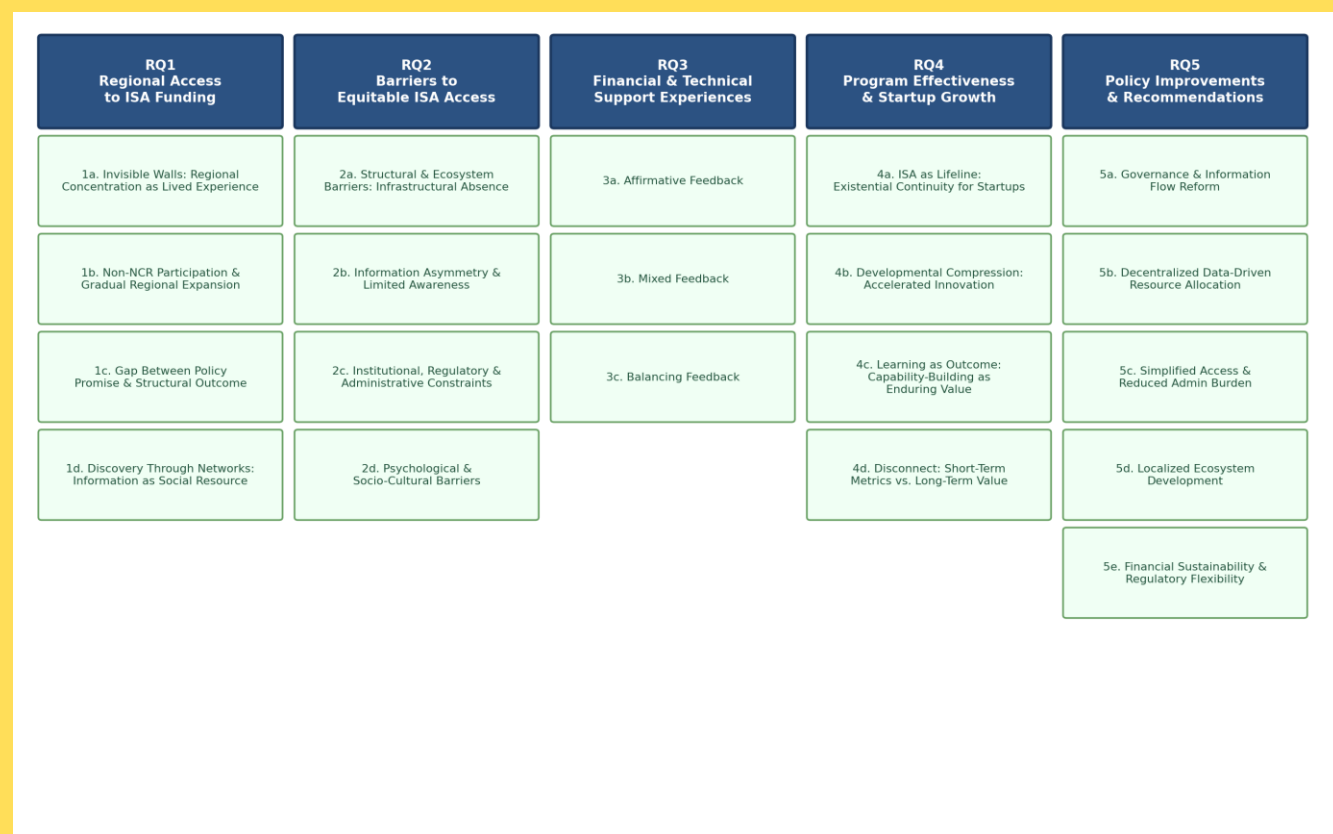


Figure 3. Thematic Findings Map

5. Discussion

The findings, read together, disclose a single underlying pattern: participants did not experience NCR concentration as intentional bias but as the cumulative outcome of structural conditions — ecosystem density, intermediary presence, and network proximity — that are themselves concentrated in Metro Manila. This is directly consistent with Krugman's (1991) Spatial Inequality Theory, and mirrors dynamics documented in innovation financing in other developing economies where capital cities dominate startup funding. The finding that institutional intent (TBI placement, explicit non-NCR prioritization) has outpaced measured outcomes extends Institutional Theory by showing that formal decentralization is a necessary but not sufficient condition for equitable access. The finding that information travels through informal networks rather than structured channels reflects the Resource-Based View: knowledge and network access function as intangible resources whose distribution mirrors, rather than corrects, existing ecosystem concentration.

Barriers under RQ2 extend the theoretical framework further. Structural and administrative barriers show that regional founders lack not only physical ecosystem infrastructure but also the intangible administrative and legal capital that the ISA's compliance architecture implicitly assumes. Information asymmetry is best explained by Akerlof's (1970) information asymmetry theory and Rogers' (2003) innovation diffusion theory — frameworks not part of the study's original design but made necessary by the data — which together explain why unequal access to information distorts participation even when a program is formally open to all. Psychological and socio-cultural barriers draw on Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) and Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior to explain why structurally available opportunity is not always psychologically available opportunity.

Table 7 maps each theoretical prediction against the study's evidence: Spatial Inequality Theory was confirmed and extended, as NCR dominance proved structurally self-reinforcing across program cycles; the Resource-Based View was confirmed, as capability gaps — not geography alone — determined how fully founders absorbed ISA benefits; the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Model was confirmed and extended, as intermediaries such as TBIs and incubators emerged as the decisive translators of national policy into regional outcomes; and Institutional Theory was confirmed, as administrative architecture operated as a regressive equity constraint independent of policy intent.

Table 7. How Findings Confirm, Extend, or Nuance the Theoretical Framework

Theory	Core Prediction	Confirmed / Extended / Nuanced	Key Evidence
Spatial Inequality Theory (Krugman, 1991)	Agglomeration concentrates innovation and capital in urban hubs	Confirmed and extended: NCR dominance is structurally self-reinforcing across program cycles	Themes 1a–1c
Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991)	Resource deficits disadvantage peripheral firms	Confirmed: capability gaps (not geography alone) determine ISA benefit absorption	Themes 3b, 4c
Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Model (Isenberg, 2010)	Ecosystem coherence determines policy effectiveness	Confirmed and extended: intermediaries (TBIs, incubators) are decisive translators of policy into outcomes	Themes 1d, 2a, 3a
Institutional Theory (North, 1990; Wurth et al., 2023)	Formal rules produce uneven outcomes where informal institutional capacity varies	Confirmed: administrative architecture operates as a regressive equity constraint independent of policy intent	Themes 2c, 3c

These findings should be interpreted in light of the study's scope. Participants were drawn from successful SGF/SVF recipients and institutional actors; founders whose applications were denied, and those who did not apply because of perceived barriers, were not included. The study may therefore overrepresent the experiences of successful applicants while underrepresenting the barriers faced by those excluded from funding altogether. As a qualitative, interpretivist inquiry, the study does not claim statistical generalizability; it offers analytical transferability to comparable policy and ecosystem contexts, particularly other developing-country archipelagos examining startup access disparities or regional inequality in government grant programs. Future research that includes denied applicants and non-applicant founders is recommended to more fully examine these barriers.

6. Recommendations

The following recommendations are derived directly from the study's conclusions and are framed through the lens of financial management. Each recommendation reinterprets a conclusion as a financial problem of allocation, cost, timing, measurement, or sustainability, and proposes a corresponding financial-management intervention.

- Institute target-based regional allocation with public performance monitoring: publish an annual, disaggregated funding scorecard by region and set explicit per-region allocation targets, reviewed each cycle.
- Reform disbursement and compliance: release a 20–30% mobilization advance on grant signing and adopt a compliance and reporting schedule tiered to grant size, easing working-capital constraints on the smallest ventures.
- Provide grantee financial coaching: issue a standardized Day-1 budgeting and liquidation onboarding kit paired with structured financial-management coaching at award.

- Redesign evaluation to a longer horizon: track developmental outcomes (capability, follow-on funding, partnerships, survival) at 1, 3, and 5 years post-grant, and monitor cash runway, burn rate, and grant-dependency ratio.
- Deliver regional pre-application readiness programs in grant literacy, financial documentation, and budget preparation, led by TBIs with LGU co-hosting.
- Embed a weighted problem-founder-fit criterion in the SGF/SVF evaluation rubric, and monitor its effect on the regional distribution of awards.
- Build lasting regional capacity through a blended-finance vehicle pooling national, LGU, and private capital to fund standing regional financial-intermediation capacity rather than one-off grants.
- Institute post-grant sustainability financing: pair revenue-diversification coaching with a defined bridge-financing or follow-on pathway to close the post-grant funding gap.
- Institutionalize regional participatory governance through standing regional advisory councils with a formal mandate over program design, allocation priorities, and periodic review.

These measures share a single financial logic: each conclusion of the study points to a financial-access problem of allocation, entry cost, appraisal horizon, transaction and working-capital cost, or long-term sustainability, and each is addressed through a corresponding financial-management instrument. Because several measures require no additional appropriation or legislative amendment, and because each redirects an existing process rather than creating a new one, the recommendations are both practical for immediate adoption and structurally consequential for advancing the equitable access that Republic Act No. 11337 intends. Table 8 presents the full Strategic Recommendations Matrix, sequencing these measures by implementation horizon.

Table 8. Strategic Recommendations Matrix

Recommendation & Mechanism	Responsible Agencies	Expected Outputs	Horizon
Reform disbursement and compliance — release a 20–30% mobilization advance on signing; tiered compliance schedule by grant size	DOST-PCIEERD (SGF); DTI-NDC (SVF); DBM; COA	Amended circular issued; $\geq 90\%$ of new grantees receive an advance; lighter reporting load for small grants	Year 1 (Immediate)
Provide grantee financial coaching — Day-1 budgeting pack plus ≥ 2 coaching sessions at award	DOST; DTI; DICT; TBIs	Onboarding kit distributed at award; reduced rejection and liquidation-error rates	Year 1 (Immediate)
Launch a regional allocation scorecard — public dashboard of funding by region, sector, and instrument	DOST; DTI; DICT	Baseline scorecard published; regional targets set; annual variance reported	Year 1 (Immediate)
Deliver regional pre-application readiness programs — grant literacy, financial documentation, budget preparation	TBIs (lead); DOST; LGUs	Readiness programs delivered per region; rise in non-NCR applications	Years 2–3 (Medium)
Redesign evaluation to a long horizon — track outcomes at 1, 3, and 5 years; monitor runway, burn rate, grant-dependency	DOST; DTI; DICT (M&E units)	New M&E framework adopted; longitudinal and financial-health data collected	Years 2–3 (Medium)

Recommendation & Mechanism	Responsible Agencies	Expected Outputs	Horizon
Embed a problem-founder-fit screen in the SGF/SVF evaluation rubric	DOST; DTI; DICT	Updated evaluation rubric; award-distribution effect tracked	Years 2–3 (Medium)
Establish blended-finance regional capacity — pool national, LGU, and private capital for standing regional intermediation	DOST; DTI; DICT; DBM; LGUs; private co-investors	Operational blended-finance vehicle; regional support hubs established	Years 3–5 (Long-term)
Institute post-grant sustainability financing — revenue-diversification coaching paired with a bridge-financing pathway	DOST; DTI; DICT; DBM; TBIs; private capital	Sustainability track operating; measurable drop in grant-dependency	Years 3–5 (Long-term)
Institutionalize regional participatory governance — standing regional advisory councils	DOST; DTI; DICT; LGUs	Regional advisory councils convened; documented participatory design and review	Years 3–5 (Long-term)

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Figure Legends

Figure 1. Conceptual Chain: Disparities → Access → Outcomes → Policy Gaps. Depicts the causal pathway from regional structural disparities, through access barriers, to startup outcomes and resulting policy gaps. Presented in the Literature Review.

Figure 2. Data Analysis Flowchart (Modified Van Kaam Method). Depicts the analytic sequence from epoché and bracketing through horizontalization, reduction and elimination, meaning-unit clustering, individual textural and structural descriptions, to the composite textural-structural description (essence). Presented in the Methodology.

Figure 3. Thematic Findings Map. Depicts all twenty themes organized under their corresponding research questions (RQ1–RQ5), illustrating the overall thematic architecture of the study. Presented in the Results.

Figures

All figures are presented in full within the body of the manuscript, at the point of first reference (Literature Review, Methodology, and Results, respectively). They are reproduced together below for consolidated reference.

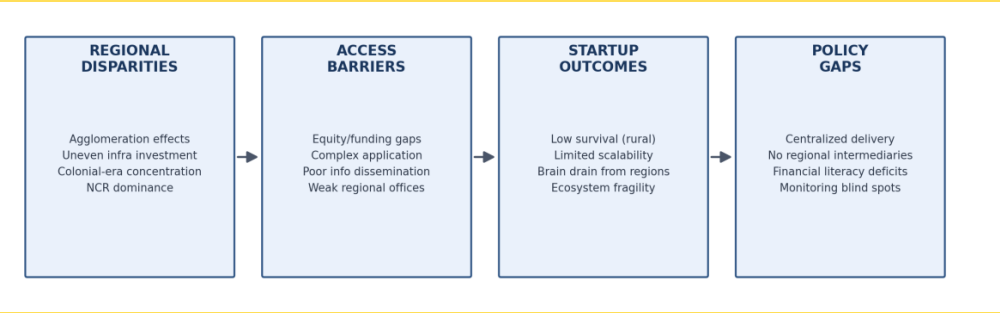


Figure 1. Conceptual Chain: Disparities → Access → Outcomes → Policy Gaps

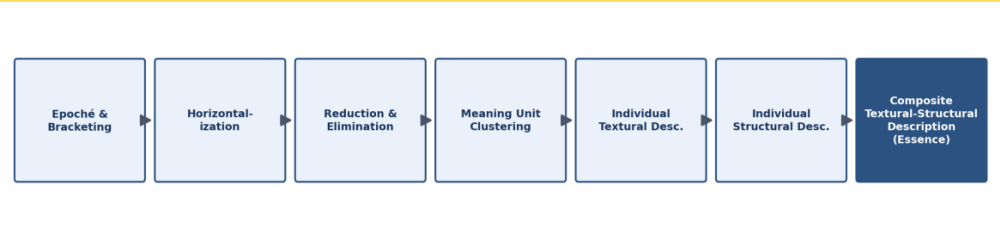


Figure 2. Data Analysis Flowchart (Modified Van Kaam Method)

RQ1 Regional Access to ISA Funding	RQ2 Barriers to Equitable ISA Access	RQ3 Financial & Technical Support Experiences	RQ4 Program Effectiveness & Startup Growth	RQ5 Policy Improvements & Recommendations
1a. Invisible Walls: Regional Concentration as Lived Experience	2a. Structural & Ecosystem Barriers: Infrastructural Absence	3a. Affirmative Feedback	4a. ISA as Lifeline: Existential Continuity for Startups	5a. Governance & Information Flow Reform
1b. Non-NCR Participation & Gradual Regional Expansion	2b. Information Asymmetry & Limited Awareness	3b. Mixed Feedback	4b. Developmental Compression: Accelerated Innovation	5b. Decentralized Data-Driven Resource Allocation
1c. Gap Between Policy Promise & Structural Outcome	2c. Institutional, Regulatory & Administrative Constraints	3c. Balancing Feedback	4c. Learning as Outcome: Capability-Building as Enduring Value	5c. Simplified Access & Reduced Admin Burden
1d. Discovery Through Networks: Information as Social Resource	2d. Psychological & Socio-Cultural Barriers		4d. Disconnect: Short-Term Metrics vs. Long-Term Value	5d. Localized Ecosystem Development
				5e. Financial Sustainability & Regulatory Flexibility

Figure 3. Thematic Findings Map