



Brain Trust Meeting Report 12-13 September 2025, Mexico City



From left to right: Christa Orth (Seaworthy Fundraising), Sean Reggee (Community Expert, Transbantu Association Zambia), Erika Castellanos (GATE), Adrian Coman (Arcus Foundation), Daniel Benitez (Independent Activist), Addison Smith (Wellspring Philanthropic Fund), Broden Giambrone (International Trans Fund), Kent Klindera (consultant), Anwar Ogrm (GATE), Adam-Michael Royston (Queer Livelihoods Project), Effie Dusoleil (Lead Social Impact), Carlos García de León (facilitator).



Overview

GATE's Innovation Lab is a new strategy for sustaining the trans and gender diverse movement. Created by GATE to address the critical emergency funding needs of our communities, it is a bold and strategic approach to reducing financial dependency and fostering economic resilience among trans and gender diverse organizations worldwide.

The Brain Trust, formed in the first phase of this initiative, convenes a diverse and dynamic strategic advisory group that unites key stakeholders from different sectors across trans communities, donors and social enterprise experts. The purpose of the Brain Trust is to identify existing and working models, design potential new models for financial sustainability, and advise this initiative through its four phases: strategic visioning, knowledge production, mentorship and funding.

[Review the meeting agenda.](#)

On 12-13 September 2025, GATE convened a meeting of the Brain Trust in Mexico City, Mexico, to support the implementation of GATE's Innovation Lab. This meeting comes at a time when many trans-led organizations are experiencing shrinking resources, rising political hostility and attacks from anti-gender movements. It focused on three primary outputs:

- an actionable plan for Phases 2, 3, and 4 of the initiative;
- input and contributions to the development of the Handbook; and
- strengthened collaboration and alignment amongst Brain Trust members.

This report summarizes the discussions and outcomes of this meeting and highlights the points of alignment and practical follow-up that will guide the next phases of the Innovation Lab.

Current Situation

The meeting started with a presentation of the GATE Innovation Lab as a strategic response to the current situation facing trans communities worldwide. It outlined the initiative and the role of the Brain Trust.

[Review the presentation slides.](#)

In spite of the present issues of structural underfunding and anti-gender attacks, there is an opportunity to position the current situation as an inflection point for building resilient, financially autonomous movements. The overall vision of the Lab is to do just that, by reclaiming economic power through the development of a global knowledge source of sustainable financial models. This knowledge source, the Social Enterprise Handbook, will be used to strengthen organizational resilience, supported by tailored mentorship and targeted capacity building provided by relevant social enterprise experts. This will ultimately catalyze multi-stakeholder collaboration in order to drive systemic change in philanthropy.

The role of the Brain Trust is to function exclusively as an advisory mechanism across the four Innovation Lab phases. These include: 1. Strategic vision; 2. Knowledge production; 3. Mentorship and tailored support; and 4. Funding and implementation. This final phase involves the development of a transparent mechanism that can connect donors with trans-led organizations to streamline support and reduce barriers to funding.

The main takeaways of the presentation are summarized below.

- **Context relevance:** Trans and gender diverse communities are experiencing major funding losses, targeted political attacks, and the dismantling of critical funding infrastructure.
- **Vision of the Lab:** The Innovation Lab seeks to reclaim economic power, strengthen organizational resilience, put forward best practices for donors, and promote long-term sustainability.
- **Approach of the Lab:** The Innovation Lab is designed to be purpose-driven, rooted in community priorities, and shaped through broad collaboration across sectors.
- **Overview of the phases and progress:**
 1. **Strategic vision: Completed**
 2. Knowledge production: In progress
 3. Mentorship and tailored support: In planning
 4. Funding and implementation: In planning





Phase 2: Social Enterprise Handbook

The Social Enterprise Handbook is the key output for Phase 2: Knowledge Production. Once complete, the Handbook will include a definition of social enterprise, guidance on how to get started, information on financing, legal and community considerations, case studies, a practical checklist, and a list of additional resources. Its guiding principles are to keep the resource simple and practical, reduce barriers for activists, and make use of storytelling to communicate key ideas.

[Review the presentation slides.](#)

Progress Update

The development of this Handbook has progressed significantly, with a draft outline prepared. The literature review has been finalized, a global survey was carried out with 71 responses collected and analyzed, and initial mapping was undertaken for potential case studies and possible donors willing to invest in start-up capital.

The community survey provides important insights into the level of knowledge and the kinds of support organizations are seeking, with key highlights outlined below.

- Most respondents have some familiarity with social enterprise, but many seek clearer guidance.
- Most organizations possess strong assets such as skilled staff and community trust, but lack cash reserves.
- The main goals of organizations are to achieve financial independence and sustainability (38%) and create job opportunities (30%).
- The most common obstacles are lack of start-up funding (67%), legal/tax barriers (41%), and fear of losing capital (40%).
- The key needs of organizations were highlighted as training (86%), seed funding (75%), and mentorship and financial advice (61%).
- Several potential case studies were identified, such as Nam Kwan Seafood (Thailand), Kinnar Asmita Salon (India), and TransTech (US).

Discussions

The Brain Trust members reflected on the presentations and shared additional input and guidance to strengthen the Handbook development. The key points discussed are outlined below.

Audience

The Social Enterprise Handbook's audience was considered with regard to the primary audience: organizations facing funding cuts; individual entrepreneurs; or both. The consensus was for the Handbook to focus primarily on organizations, with some recognition of individual initiatives throughout. The importance of providing tools to build systems and models that are sustainable regardless of organizational leadership or without over-reliance on particular individuals was emphasized.

Accessibility

The survey results confirmed the need for materials and guidance that are both basic and accessible. The consensus was to start by providing some basic financial literacy and clear explanations of business concepts and budgeting. Given that not all organizations that will use the Handbook will benefit from the mentorship and financial support offered in later phases, it was suggested that some Brain Trust members could hold limited “office hours” to provide additional support.

Definitions and Community Framing

When it came to definitions, it was agreed that no wording can capture the full range of social enterprises. The recommendation was to have a simple baseline definition and to use case studies to illustrate variations throughout the Handbook. With regards to framing, it was agreed to focus on presenting social enterprises as diverse opportunities for community organizations to generate income to fund and sustain a mission. Additionally, the Handbook will frame profit-making as an opportunity to provide funding for the community, rather than for personal gain, and to explain clearly the difference between cost recovery and profit-making.

Case Studies

The conversation around case studies emphasized the need for examples that reflect everyday grassroots realities and provide clear lessons of both successes and failures. However, they should not aim to reflect the realities of all organizations worldwide, as this would be impossible to achieve. Instead, it was agreed that the case studies could include examples from outside trans and gender diverse communities, where useful. There was a suggestion to incorporate the [Blue Ocean Strategy](#) to highlight uncharted opportunities and new market spaces. The placement of case studies within the Handbook was also discussed, with proposals for placement either at the beginning of the publication or dispersed throughout. In addition, there was encouragement to refine some of the case studies’ guiding questions to address issues such as the type of business model adopted, common pitfalls and surprises encountered. Additional proposals for case studies were shared, including Gyana Trans United, EuroCentralAsian Lesbian Community, PULSE Clinics, SOMOSVoices, and AIDS Hilfe.

Handbook Outline

The outline was reviewed, and proposals were suggested for improvement. These include shortening section titles, adding a definition page (e.g., an appendix on business terminology), introducing a welcome section that names the barriers our communities face to start-up and sustain businesses, and broadening the section on the current funding context. Additional elements for inclusion were proposed, as outlined below.

- The creation of an online training module to be hosted on the [GATE Learning Hub](#) for greater accessibility.
- The inclusion of an appendix with a list of other initiatives to explore in addition to the comprehensive case studies included within the Handbook.
- Hosting a webinar to launch the Handbook and create interest in the publication and initiative. Organizations from the case studies would be invited to share their stories of securing investment, scaling up, and navigating legal issues.





Phases 3 and 4

Phase 3. Mentorship and Tailored Support, and Phase 4. Funding and Implementation require integral input from the Brain Trust. Prior to this meeting, GATE refrained from in-depth planning of these phases to ensure that input from the Brain Trust was centralized in this process. This input will guide priorities as GATE develops Phases 3 and 4.

Discussion

To guide this discussion, a set of guiding questions was presented to the Brain Trust to support their reflection and input. These are outlined below.

1. How should these phases be structured?
2. What level of involvement does the Brain Trust desire?
3. How should the selection, pairing, and funding mechanisms be designed?

Profiles

The need to define the profiles of mentees and grantees was emphasized, including clarifying priorities for criteria in evaluating the applications. Organizations operating in criminalizing contexts and those facing a strong demand for services will be prioritized for support.

Selection Process

The selection process was discussed, with a strong emphasis on the need for transparency. This will include a clear scoring system, with a proposal to split this into two tracks: one for organizations just starting out in social enterprise; and another for those with existing enterprises. The selection process will include a sub-committee of Brain Trust members to shortlist applications. The final selection will require approval of the entire Brain Trust, with a further proposal to consult potential funders prior to the final decisions being made to ensure donor alignment.

Mentorship

It was agreed that mentors will be identified before finalizing the list of mentees/grantees so that the needs and capacities can be matched. A repository of potential mentors will be created to support this process, and case study organizations may be invited to take part if they are willing. Once the mentees/grantees are selected, local mentors might be considered (e.g., local actors in government programming) to help connect organizations with potential sources of capital in their local contexts. Finally, several members suggested that peer exchange opportunities could be built through online cohort meetings.

Financial Support

The types of grants and financial support to be provided were addressed. It was agreed that not all grants will be directed through GATE's funding mechanism, as one of the key enablers of the Innovation Lab is to connect interested donors directly with specific mentees/grantees. Donors such as the International Trans Fund have already expressed interest in providing grants. Other potential donors interested in specific profiles will also be approached. While noting the need to respect each organization's internal processes, several guiding principles were agreed upon, outlined below.

1. Tiered funding, requiring some income generation to unlock additional support, was proposed as a way to avoid creating grant-dependent 'projects.' There was also some discussion on whether these funds should carry a return on interest, although no consensus was reached.
2. Flexibility in size and pace was considered essential. While an average of USD \$75,000 was discussed, this was recognized as too high for some organizations, and the final amounts should be adapted to each context.

To support these processes, Arcus has offered to provide technical support to help strengthen grant management systems, where needed.





Decisions and follow-up

The meeting concluded with a set of concrete next steps for both the Handbook and the upcoming mentorship and funding phases.

Handbook Development

The next steps are to finalise the Social Enterprise Handbook and launch it publicly. The consultants will integrate into the Handbook the feedback from the Brain Trust obtained during this meeting. The timeline for this process will be as follows:
The case studies will be shared with Brain Trust members by 29 September 2025.
The draft Handbook will be circulated for review by 17 October 2025.
The Handbook will be finalized and sent for layout and design in early November 2025.
The webinar launch will be planned for the first half of November 2025, once the layout and design has been complete.


Phases 3 and 4 planning

To continue the planning for phases 3 and 4, the following steps will be taken.

The mentor repository will be prepared by GATE, and the Brain Trust members will propose names for inclusion.
A detailed plan will be drafted by GATE for phases 3 and 4, to be reviewed at the next Brain Trust meeting, date to be confirmed.

Conclusion

The meeting of the Brain Trust in Mexico City confirmed the value of this strategic advisory group in providing a multi-sectoral space for different perspectives to guide the direction and outputs of the GATE Innovation Lab. Brain Trust members identified priorities for the Handbook and gave direction on the design of the mentorship and funding phases. Consensus was reached on immediate tasks leading to the next online Brain Trust meeting, in which the main focus will be the approval of the detailed plan for phases 3 and 4. An evaluation form has been circulated to gather members' views on the role of the Brain Trust in 2026, and to gauge their desired level of engagement. These responses will help to shape the agenda for the year ahead and set shared expectations of continued collaboration.





Brain Trust Members

Name	Organization
Abhina Aher	TWEET Foundation
Adam-Michael Royston	Queer Livelihoods Project
Addison Smith	Wellspring Philanthropic Fund
Adrian Coman	Arcus Foundation
Anwar Ogrm	Global Action for Trans Equality
Broden Giambrone	International Trans Fund
Christa Orth	Seaworthy Fundraising
Daniel Benitez	Independent Activist
Effie Dusoleil	Lead Social Impact
Erika Castellanos	Global Action for Trans Equality
Felix Endara	Foundation for a Just Society
Justus Eisfeld	Koppa - the LGBTI+ Economic Power
Larkin Callaghan	Gilead Sicences
Manisha Dakhal	Blue Diamond Society
Sean Reggee	Transbantu Association Zambia
Sophia Hernández	Ford Foundation
Stephen Leonelli	Council for Global Equality
Sylvester Merchant	Lakshya Trust