



**“When you have trust-based philanthropy, you really have a friend along that journey who understands.”**

## **A Conversation with Felix Brooks-Church of [Sanku](#)**

**Jessica Kantor**

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**Jessica Kantor: Can you introduce yourself and tell me about your work?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** My name is Felix Brooks-Church. I'm the co-founder and CEO of Sanku. Sanku is a social enterprise focusing on improving nutrition throughout East Africa. More specifically, we're working in what's called food fortification. This is essentially, adding critical micronutrients to the most commonly consumed staple foods throughout the countries we work in, which are Tanzania, Kenya, and Ethiopia. We do that by identifying who produces the food locally and what the staple is. In our case, it's maize, our corn, and wheat flour.

There are thousands of millers throughout East Africa that feed entire nations. We provide these millers, these food producers, with the tools, training, incentives, and business models to effectively fortify or strengthen their food with lifesaving nutrients to ultimately reach hundreds of millions of people.

We work closely with the private sector millers, and we also work with the governments to ensure that there's good policy framework enforcement around that, creating this "enabling" environment and ultimately, millions of people will have access to this basic human right of better nutrition.

**Jessica Kantor: When was your venture founded and what would you say makes your approach at Sanku distinctive?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** We launched and started operating in Tanzania around 2013, and then two years ago in Kenya, and then a few months ago in Ethiopia. The number one [distinction] is that we're addressing a gap in a proven model or proven science.

Fortification of staple foods has existed for decades in the Global North. Large industries add nutrients to edible oil, flour, salts, sugar, you name it. Over the last 10 to 20 years [there has been] this expansion. [However] in some of these markets, it's not effectively implemented. It's really only covering large industries or essentially, processed food from large industries, which doesn't address the nutritional gap, and doesn't reach the most at-risk populations.

What makes us unique is that we focus on what's called the small and medium-scale food producers that nobody traditionally has touched. That food has been considered unable to fortify because there is no mechanism or business model or technology to do the job.

We invented a machine that was specifically invented to attach to small mills. This industry was untouched. That's our special sauce combined with a business model that offsets the cost to do this job, incentivizes the millers, and ultimately makes us scale. What makes us unique is that we go to the hard-to-work places. We work with the hard-to-reach industries, and we do it through a very innovative technology and business model.

**Jessica Kantor: Can you share an example that illustrates the impact of your work?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** Everything we do is an example because before us, food wasn't fortified [in this region] and now it is. Food wasn't nutritious and available and now it is. When we moved into Tanzania about 10 years ago, none of these small mills were adding nutrients to their flour. Again, 95% of the population of 60 million people rely on these small mills to produce and sell to them, and ultimately for them to consume this flour every single day. We built a machine that now could add the nutrients, and then we supported that and wrapped that with a business model to incentivize the millers.

The example is we went from zero people consuming fortified flour to over 10 million people over the course of our 10 years of work. These were people that, without our work, would never have that access because people didn't consider it fortifiable. The impact is that no one had been able to do it before. [For us], just because there was no blueprint, doesn't mean you don't try to fix it. Our model and really our culture is, if it's broken, let's figure out a way to fix it.

**Jessica Kantor: How are you tracking success for your model? Is it how many products are sold or how many companies you partner with?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** At the end of the day, it's how many people have access and are consuming this fortified flour. That's our main metric, and that's that 10 million people.

That's the major KPI, and we calculate that very simply. Our machines are another way we were able to remote calculate this in real time. Our machines are connected to the nearest cell tower with a SIM card. So in real time, the machines are feeding back to our dashboards how much fortified flour is being produced, and how much nutrients are being added to that flour, and [whether] it is accurate, as per the standard.

Once that fortified flour is produced, then it's an easy calculation of how many people we're reaching because we know on average how much flour everybody eats per day. You divide the volume of fortified flour available by that per-capita-consumption figure. For example, in Tanzania, it's 160 grams per day. We can easily figure out the assumed reach, the assumed amount of flour, and how many people we can feed with that flour. That's high level and pretty accurate in real time as far as how many people we are potentially reaching on a daily basis.

**Jessica Kantor: In thinking about the support that you've received, what's something that surprised you or turned out to be really helpful in order to scale?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** For context, we were approved [recently] by Rippleworks. They approved a larger \$3 million grant. On top of that, they approved a \$100,000 grant. The emergency grant, which was tied to actual or potential lost funding through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) freeze, that \$100,000 came through a couple of days ago. That will go directly to Ethiopia where we lost a lot of money through USAID being frozen. The immediate impact is that money will go to cover operations to keep momentum going, to allow us to not slow down on installing these machines and getting mills to produce fortified flour.

This is to ultimately get people fortified flour as soon as possible because it's a critical place to do this work [where] 740 kids die every single day from lack of nutrients and from preventable illness. Any delay in our programming there would ultimately mean that we're losing out on a chance to literally save lives.

Their ability to approve that before we were even approved for the larger long-term \$3 million grant, just shows: 'we're in this for the long run, but let's put out this fire immediately as well.' For us, we're like, 'wow, Rippleworks is amazing.' It's amazing work that they stepped up so quickly and so fast. We're looking forward to working with them. In six months, I'll have a lot more to talk about because the relationship will be more mature, but so far it's looking really, really good.

**Jessica Kantor: So just to confirm, you received a \$100,000 emergency grant to cover the costs of what you lost with the USAID freeze and then long term, you were in a process for about 6 months to receive the \$3 million?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** Yes, \$100,000 and \$3 million. It was roughly a six month [process]. I've been reaching out to them and they've known about us over the period of five or six years, so we weren't strangers. It just came to the right time that they said now we're going to seriously start a consideration process, due diligence process. It's very thorough and very detailed.

**Jessica Kantor: Do you have any feedback on that type of process for Rippleworks and funders in general?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** No negative feedback. It was done very professionally. We had two people. They were based in Zimbabwe, which was important because with the time zone, it was convenient for calls. They followed up with everybody that we said that they should speak to within the organization and organized those meetings. It was seamless. It was very well done, and ultimately, they were able to get all the information that enabled them to make what we feel was the right decision.

What I hope other donors do is follow that. I'd rather six months of intense due diligence and reporting information to put them in a position to do trust-based philanthropy, rather than every month, our team spending hours on very detailed reports attached to very restricted funding that doesn't allow us to be malleable and move and pivot with the changing environment that we work in.

That's why we don't work with the Gates Foundation and previously, USAID. They represent maybe 10% of our funding, or what we call big aid or institutional, highly restricted funding, just because of the reporting requirements, you almost have to hire new team members just to focus on managing that grant. It's very restrictive, and it might work for bigger, more developed organizations.

For a social enterprise, which we still consider ourselves, small to medium level— we go into environments that are so unpredictable and have no blueprint that we have to be able to have the freedom to shift away from things that we might have thought were a good idea six months ago and pivot. The ultimate mission remains the same. But to be restricted on things just restricts the work and the outcomes.

**Jessica Kantor: What role does trust play in your relationship with funders? How can a funder cultivate trust?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** Ultimately, it comes down to their mission and their culture. When you have trust-based philanthropy, you really have a friend along that journey who understands. They have that relationship with so many other social entrepreneurs, they understand the challenges of this job, and they can offer a lot of support operationally, not just the funding. Whereas when it's that traditional grant, it's like you're

reporting to a boss who doesn't care about the work or cares about agreeing to some contract that is now outdated after a year. Trust goes both ways.

The majority, 90% of our donors are trust-based philanthropy and foundations. These are the Big Bang Philanthropy, the Dovetail Impact Foundation, the Mulago Foundation, and now the Rippleworks' [of the world]. They offer a community of support as well. They put us in touch with their other grantees and the other social entrepreneurs. It creates a much healthier, more respectful working environment. It makes us feel that we're not in trouble to share when [things] are not going right, and often, it doesn't go right. It's that we're not going to be in trouble, and we're not going to jeopardize future funding or have funding held back because we didn't spend exactly the right amount of dollars on the gas for that month when it didn't make sense to travel as much, for example. Aligning with our cultural values is all about trust and transparency. When you don't have that in place, it creates an unnecessary power dynamic.

**Jessica Kantor: What bold shifts do you think are needed in the funding landscape in order to truly center the voices of those closest to the problem?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** Trust-based philanthropy is a great start and the due diligence process [...] whether it's four months or six months. A part of that due diligence is typically a field visit. That ties into what I was saying before.

When somebody comes and visits your work, they spend time with the team, they understand people on an individual basis, what drives you, and there's a compassion around that. That builds a relationship, that builds trust as well. They get to know the DNA of your project and your people rather than Excel sheets and numbers.

Large aid or big aid is often faceless. It's X's and O's, and that's not why anybody does this work. We don't do this work because we want to move this number to this number. These numbers represent people.

[...] The mistake smaller enterprises, NGOs or companies, make is they chase money. They'll have a big USAID, or big aid, or Gates even, say the donor wants this done, and they'll find somebody to plug into that, desperate for the money. Then you're doing something that might be out of your wheelhouse, out of your comfort zone, and you're not going to do a good job.

The due diligence for us is often: do we want to work with this donor? Are they going to trust that we are the experts in what we do and they're going to back us, or are they going to try to put us into something else to fill their quota or whatever it might be? To use Rippleworks as an example, they completely believe in what we do, how we do it, and the outcomes we're going to achieve, and so that's the trust relationship we have.

**Jessica Kantor: Can you share an example of how the greater freedom of an unrestricted grant impacts your work and your ability to scale?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** One example is we received unrestricted grants to enter Kenya two years ago. We had this very specific business model and cost associated with that. Then within about a year, it wasn't working. We completely pivoted from that business model. The ultimate goal of reaching people with the basic human right of better nutrition is still there, but how we approached it, and the cost [analysis] of certain areas completely changed. It was saying, what got us here, isn't going to get us there and we want to completely reinvent how we're operating.

We weren't held to previous KPIs because now we're introducing [essentially] a six-month delay, in that we're not going to be reaching that many people or that many mills or spending this much money because we have to sit back and reevaluate. And not to have that pressure that we had to spend X amount in this quarter or else we weren't going to get it in the next quarter, and things like that.

What it gives you is freedom to reinvent yourself and ultimately be an even better organization without fear of losing out on money. This [idea of] just powering forward in a direction that you know is going to ultimately fail just to burn up money to appease a donor, which happens — is completely irresponsible.

**Jessica Kantor: Are there any requirements or touch points with other funders that are still helpful to you, even with unrestricted grants?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** Yes, every conversation I have with a donor is helpful. It's almost like an advisory board. When I'm talking to a donor, I'm also talking to a donor who that week has talked to dozens of other grantees and heard similar problems, and talked to other CEOs who are at my stage [...] We send out a quarterly report to all our donors, whether they ask for it or not. We over-communicate past the expectation.

I write at the end that I'm happy to jump on a phone call with you to talk through this in more detail because I see every time I'm talking to them, there's a chance for us to better ourselves. We actually go above the reporting requirements, to the point where some donors are like, 'I'm good, you can just send me an annual report. I don't need these many reports.' I'd rather hear that than somebody saying, 'you're not sharing enough information with me.'

**Jessica Kantor: Where do you get most of your funding?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** Foundations by far, 80%, upwards of 90% of funding is foundation-based.

**Jessica Kantor: What have been the biggest challenges in the support that you've received in the past, at any touchpoint in the process?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** It starts with reaching out to donors. When you work with foundations, sometimes they might have some restrictions around who they like [to support]. It might be a geographic restriction, it might be that they want to work in livelihoods, and we do nutrition and they don't see it crossing over enough.

The first time we were denied by Rippleworks was about a year ago; they wanted to focus on proximate leadership. They wanted to fund organizations run by people from that country. We work in East Africa. I'm not from East Africa, so they obviously pivoted as well, and that's not such an issue. Those are some of the barriers [and reasons] that we might not have been selected in the past from a certain foundation. We didn't check all the boxes to what they wanted to achieve, which is fine.

Once we've received a grant or a multiple-year grant from a donor, some of the issues really have only come down to the level of reporting and the requirements of reporting for some donors. Again, because we work primarily with foundations, it's typically a light lift... [Some donors will say] we don't want our money being spent on your staff's time creating reports. We want that money spent literally saving lives." That's why we work with foundations. When we work with non-foundations like the UN World Food Programme (WFP) or USAID [...] there's a lot of reporting that we've actually had to hire somebody specific just to manage reporting.

**Jessica Kantor: Have you received any type of funding from governments?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** The only example would be the government of Tanzania. They recently agreed to purchase our machines, and so that's buy-in. Because we never thought they would do that. The only support they'd offer us in the past is maybe relieving some import duties or VAT [value added tax] on the goods that we import and sell. That's a great, big sign. But generally speaking, government still expects you to pay per diem for them to show up to a meeting to talk about work they should be doing anyway. It's not as corrupt as it was maybe 20 years ago. USAID closing shop is going to be a big wake-up call because a lot of the money they would get to do the jobs they do was paid through them and through various partners.

**Jessica Kantor: What advice would you give to funders who want to help social ventures be successful?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** Visit the work, number one. On paper, not every social enterprise presents well and that's not a bad thing. A lot of organizations have beautiful, shiny one-pagers, and have the CEO on the call and the CEO is based in DC, and



they're well-polished because that's where they put their money. A lot of organizations don't have that because all their money is going to actual impact, and their proposal might not be perfect or has a misspelled word because it wasn't written by somebody in DC.

Until you're on the ground and see how impressive and inspiring they are, that they are locally-led or some version of that, you're not going to be able to judge them appropriately sitting in the U.S. You have to get out there, number one.

That leads to trust. You have to visit them to trust them, and then you have to keep that relationship open and transparent. Any donor who really wants to reach the last mile has to go visit the last mile. [That donor has to] really be boots on the ground during any due diligence process. Do a tour of East Africa for a month or have staff that does that. Even better, have your people influencing the decisions on grantmaking based in the countries that you operate.

That's probably the biggest shift. Over the last 15 years, foundations are hiring people from those countries, from those communities [...] they're already there and those people are feeding information up. Whether that's Segal Family Foundation, Mulago Foundation, Dovetail Impact Foundation. A lot of the grants that we've had approved over the last five years, specifically, have been by people from the countries where we're working, Rippleworks included. The wonderful women who ultimately advise the board to accept Sanku into the portfolio are based in East Africa. They understand the problem. They're working with the staff from our side who are working on the problem, and they're best positioned to advise somebody sitting in San Francisco or DC on where that money should be put.

**Jessica Kantor:** Can you describe something that you tried in your organization that didn't work and what you learned from that?

**Felix Brooks-Church:** I'll use the example of Kenya because that was the biggest and most recent one. Kenya represented just our second country. We were almost 10 years operating in Tanzania. This goes across the board for any other organization. When you're really ingrained in your first country, your only country, it's wrong to think that if you jump into another country, even if it's bordering that country, that it's just cut and paste. 'If it worked in Tanzania, it's going to work in Kenya.'

It's naive, and we were naive. It's a different government. You have to restart relationships. It's a different industry, oftentimes different culture and language. Replication means almost reinventing yourself and testing assumptions. What we learned was we couldn't cut and paste. What worked in Tanzania wasn't going to scale



in Kenya. We had to sit back almost for four to six months and reevaluate what business model would work.

The only mistake we made is we waited too long to pivot. We waited 12 months to pivot. We should have pivoted [sooner]. We knew the problems within three to six months. We should have paused then. That's on me. You have to be able to recognize things quickly and have the confidence and humility to say, 'This isn't working anymore.' A lot of times, you're just like, 'No, I'm just going to step on the gas and break through the wall.' But [it's important] to have humility and drop the ego and say: It didn't work, guys. This failed. Let's sit back. Let's reinvent ourselves.' Luckily, we have donors who support that thought process.

**Jessica Kantor: How did you overcome that? Did you leave entirely and come back at a later time? What did that look like?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** We stayed. We had about 20 to 25 staff members at that time. We didn't fire anybody. We stayed active. We had to communicate to donors that we're working on a new plan. Once we had that plan, we had to communicate to the various stakeholders, most importantly, the government. We don't operate anywhere unless we're invited to that country. We're still there under invitation, and anything we do, we want to make sure that it's within the framework and strategy of the government as well. It's super important that not only we're transparent with donors, but we're super transparent with the government.

Once everybody was clear about the new direction, then we had to engage with our millers, our customers, saying, 'This is a different way that we're going to support you. The ultimate goal is still there, but it's a different way. Instead of trying to sell you flour bags to offset premix cost, we're just going to sell you premix at affordable rates.' Basically, we adopted a different model than what's been successful in Tanzania because it didn't work in Kenya. Anybody that we'd hire moving forward would be somebody more applicable to this new model.

The response from donors was, "If anything, tell us early. Tell us early when something's not working." Not that we were hoarding information. We just went an extra three months down the tunnel than we should have when we saw warning signs. Our donor base is very loyal, very understanding. [...] They worked with so many organizations that probably have horror stories of things that haven't worked [...] They've seen it all, and because they've seen it all, that's why they're such an amazing resource to help us.

**Jessica Kantor: Regarding different types of currency, do you have any thoughts on receiving local currency compared to US dollars.**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** Keep it in US dollars. The fluctuations, especially the markets that we work in, there would be funds wasted if it came in local currency. The way we're set up is that we have a 501(c)(3) charity in the U.S. That charity owns the shares of these for-profits that we've set up in each of the countries that we operate. We had to set up for-profits in Kenya, Tanzania, and Ethiopia because we're trading goods with millers. We're selling things, whether it's flour bags, nutrients, or these machines. We can't be an NGO. The governments are basically like, you're either UNICEF or you're Coca-Cola.

Because we're not exclusively an NGO, the way we got around that is by becoming a hybrid. We sell goods locally. We pay our taxes like a for-profit, but the shares, 100% of the shares, are owned by the 501(c)(3). What that enables us to do is receive funding in US dollars, to sit in our USD account where it's safe and as needed, send it to each country. If we send US dollars and it gets converted into local currency, it has less buying power six months from now. That's the trend, the devaluation trend that these markets are going towards.

If there was a restriction to only receive funding in local [dollars], I would have that conversation saying, 'As a donor, you would have more bang for your buck if that was able to be kept in US dollars. We can buy more things and pay for more things over time if it's not exchanged and devalued in local currency.'

**Jessica Kantor:** Thinking back to when you first started to receive funding, would it have been helpful to also receive mentorship or another form of non-monetary support alongside the funding?

**Felix Brooks-Church:** Very important, and a lot of foundations do that. The best example is Mulago. They actually have a fellowship. You go through a two-year fellowship, and then you potentially get accepted into their portfolio where it's larger multi-year grants. But that fellowship is not just checking a box. A lot of our success, and definitely my development, was improved through that fellowship in understanding how to present and talk to donors, understanding mission, and how to operate.

The funding is great. It's catalytic, but that mentorship is equally valuable, not only in any fellowship, but also using them, almost like an advisory board, number one. Number two, using them as a platform to champion your work. The best fundraising tool is one donor recommending you to another donor. Talk about trust. There's no sell there. It just has a lot more weight when a donor talks to another donor. Leveraging your donors to help make connections when appropriate. I've utilized that, and that has been massive for us to gain new donors as well.

**Jessica Kantor: What are the top three things you need to unlock your ability to scale and sustain?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** As an organization, funding. I look at it this way, we're a social enterprise that is running at a loss right now, and that loss is essentially the operational funding we need from donors. Donors are subsidizing the loss. Across this vast desert, way at the end, there's this little oasis of sustainability where we break even. We essentially become free of philanthropy. We need donor funding to get us across that desert, to get to a point of scale, where economies of scale kick in and we become free of philanthropy. That's the funding part.

We need scale, and the scale part is a combination of the market and government support. We're not reaching and feeding people. We're relying on millers and the food producing industry. We give them the tools, the training, the incentives; they produce fortified flour. They're the health heroes. We need them to be enabled. Operationally, we need to be really good and critically fast to really support them. We need funding for that, so it's linked.

But no matter how good of a job we do, or how much money we get, if the government is not enabled, incentivized, or informed to enforce that market, fortification becomes very much voluntary. Voluntary fortification, because there's an extra cost, is never successful. We really need governments to step up and enforce this mandate as law with repercussions. For example: If you don't fortify, we close down your business.

That's the greatest demand creator — the government. A lot of our work, and that's more of our NGO part, is working with the government, supporting them, paying per diem, to make sure that they're understanding, prioritizing fortification, training health enforcers, food enforcers, nutritionists in the field to create that enabling environment and that enforcement. Money, millers and enforcement is how we're going to reach 100 million people.

[As a CEO], mentorship. The more questions I ask, the better I get. You need an ego for this job because you have to never give up and you're always fighting, but being able to also be humble and ask for help when things aren't working. We need to add at least two more people to the board this year. What I need to do is get more board members and continue to use our donors as an advisory board, as well as, more work-life balance. I need to hire a president, which is like a COO, because I don't have one right now, so I'm kind of two feet in two worlds. I need to spend more time with my family.

**Jessica Kantor: Is there anything that we didn't discuss that you think would be helpful for funders to know?**

**Felix Brooks-Church:** It comes down to really good due diligence, field visits, and trust-based philanthropy, and multi-year grants. Don't have an organization stressed for 12 months, not sure if they're going to have another 12 months. Give them three years. Let them hire people that they need next year. Let them hire them now and trust that that salary will be paid for. That ties into the trust.

**Jessica Kantor:** Thank you so much. This has been a really insightful conversation.

*Jessica Kantor is an independent journalist specializing in health, human rights, and social impact. Her work can be found in Fast Company, Healthcare Quarterly, Innately Science, and others, and she has been a Solutions Insights Lab interviewer since 2023. Additionally, she provides communications strategy to nonprofits and INGOs who are working on the Sustainable Development Goals. She is a living kidney donor based in Los Angeles.*

*\* This interview has been edited and condensed.*