“We don't enter a country unless we're invited in”: Felix Brooks-Church of Sanku on partnerships, localizing solutions, and aligning organizational impact with existing government priorities.

Alec Saelens
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Alec Saelens: Could you please introduce yourself, your professional background, and what you're doing specifically with Sanku as an organization?

Felix Brooks-Church: My name is Felix Brooks-Church. I'm the co-founder and CEO of Sanku. Sanku is a social enterprise working in the nutrition sector, specifically in East Africa. We work on the front lines of fortification, which means making staple food stronger by adding nutrients. We work at the village, town, and city level throughout Tanzania, Kenya, and now Ethiopia, our latest country, adding these critical nutrients to the most commonly consumed food, which is flour, whether maize or wheat flour. We're reaching about 15 million people. Hopefully, we'll scale up to 100 million people by 2030.

Alec Saelens: How are you bringing attention to this issue, and who is your intended audience?

Felix Brooks-Church: We have three audiences. First, we’re a social enterprise, which means we rely on philanthropy and grant support, so one of our audiences is donors, and people who can

fund us. We're unique in the fact that we are a hybrid. We do have sales in the countries. We work with millers who grind up the grain, and we are creating market revenue, but we do have losses that we offset through philanthropic support. A big focus for me as CEO is getting into the rooms, panels, and conferences where donors are, and then sharing our message, communicating about the problem of fortification and nutrition, and explaining our solution. Hopefully, that generates grants and funding.

Another audience is our customers, which are the millers. We don't produce the fortified flour. We provide tools to create fortified flour for existing companies throughout East Africa, and we work with close to 1,200 small millers. That's an audience to whom we have to go and share why it's important to fortify, explain the health impact, then showcase the tools, how you use them, and, ultimately, get these millers to comply.

The third audience would be the governments in the countries that we work in. We don't enter a country unless we're invited in. Some of the work between us and our development partners is to advocate for why fortification and adding nutrients to staple foods is important. Whatever country we're working in—Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, or anywhere else—we need to adopt some level of standards to mandate that all large industrial companies must fortify and add these nutrients, whether that's adding vitamin A to oil, or iron to flour or iodized salts. It's important that this process is established and owned by the government so that we come in as a supporting mechanism in their overall nutritional strategy.

Alec Saelens: Presuming that this issue of nutrition and fortifying basic foods is fairly commonplace, what makes your approach distinct? What's specific about the work you do? Could you elaborate on your social enterprise, and the technologies you produce to help facilitate your work?

Felix Brooks-Church: You're right that the concept of fortifying staple foods as a vehicle to get nutrients into people is commonplace, and decades proven. It's been well-established in the Global North. It's been around for decades. But that technology, that system, and that process hasn't fully extended to the Global South.

Where we work in Eastern Africa, there might be laws adopted by the countries stating that large industries must fortify their staple foods and add these nutrients. But the majority of people in these regions in the Global South don't eat food from large companies. There aren't big supermarkets with well-established supply chains for these processed foods. The majority of the population, and the most at-risk of malnutrition, buy locally. They buy their staple foods from

the village level or the town level. What we've done is brought that proven science of large-scale fortification—the procedures, the quality assurance, and the technologies and business models—and adapted them for a more rural, small-scale setting in Eastern Africa.

What that means is we walk into a village. Everybody's consuming flour, predominantly maize flour from these little local mills. These mills could be the size of your bathroom. They're tiny. We go to the miller and say, "Listen, the government's passed this law. It hasn't been effectively extended to you, but we're here to make it easy for you to fortify." We've invented a machine that literally attaches to this small miller's mill machine and automates the addition of these concentrated nutrients into their flour. Think about the multivitamin you take every morning. Imagine crushing that up into powder and sprinkling your iron, zinc, folic acid, and B12 into flour. All these things that we take for granted, we're now putting in the food where it's needed most.

The machine does the job of fortification and adds these nutrients, and we have a factory in East Africa where we make the nutrients. Those are the two major inputs that the miller needs, and because we're producing the products that we're selling, we're able to reduce our costs and our overheads. We're able to make it very cost-effective for these millers to do this critical job. There's no financial burden attached to the flour that they are now selling to their customers, typically mothers, right there on the street, outside of the mill. The price hasn't increased, or it's only increased by tiny, not-noticeable amounts because the last thing we want to do is create a financial burden. The majority of people—about half the population—are living on less than a dollar a day. We don't want them to choose between eating healthy and sending their daughter to school. We want this to be a basic human right. We've successfully achieved that for about 15 million people.

Alec Saelens: Can you share an example of the demonstrable impact of your work? What specifically led to the impact that you've had, and how do you measure it?

Felix Brooks-Church: The problem of malnutrition is also called hidden hunger because it's not starvation, necessarily. People are eating, but they're eating a very starchy diet. Their bellies are full, but full bellies aren't enough. If you're starving from a lack of nutrients, it's called hidden hunger. That affects about an estimated two to three billion people globally. We only have eight billion people in the world, so it's a massive issue that I don't think enough people are talking about. Sadly, the result of two to three billion people suffering from it means that every day, 8,000 children are dying from nutrition-related issues that are preventable, like diarrhea and malaria. If you have a strong immune system, you can combat these things.

It’s super important that children have these nutrients throughout those first critical thousand days of their life, nutrients that, again, you and I take for granted. Mothers need them, too. We're trying to get to mothers before they become mothers. Mothers who don't have good folate levels in their system when they're pregnant are at higher risk of having a child with deformities or lifelong health issues; sometimes, the result is death. We know the problem very well. There is decades of evidence that if you add these key nutrients into the food, it combats things like maternal death, stunting, neural tube defects, and blindness.

We're trying to scale a proven science. Our method is to just saturate these areas as much as possible. The World Health Organization [WHO] has already recommended standards of what nutrients should be put into these foods to the governments we work with. We're then physically adding it as per the WHO and government standards. We just need to get as many mills as possible and as many areas as possible to produce as much fortified flour as possible. Because once that flour is produced at these mills, it's produced, purchased, and consumed on the same day. People can't afford to buy a month's worth of flour. They literally buy a scoop for that night for their family's meal. We know if it's being produced, it's being sold. If it's being sold, it's being consumed. If it has the right levels of nutrients, that's where the science takes over.

The reduction of things like stunting—that’s long-term. Increase in IQ, which better-fortified flour and better nutrition also causes—that's also long-term. Overall, the long-term effects are that kids are stronger, smarter, better able to go to school, and better able to concentrate. They grow up to become better contributors to the workforce. There are fewer stresses on the health system, so there’s less absenteeism and, overall, less impact on the GDP at a macro level. By developing food and developing a nation through the stomach, you can develop that nation at the macro level, but these things take time. It's generational. But it starts now.

I spend a lot of time in the field, talking to mothers. They say, anecdotally, that they already notice their children are getting sick less. They're combating diarrhea. These are things that you'll be able to notice within weeks, months, and years. We know it works. We're seeing short-term evidence and then long-term impact. We're excited to see that. We've only been operational for about 10 years. We're here to stay as long as we're needed.

Alec Saelens: In the development and dissemination of the technology, what is something that you tried that didn't work? What did you learn from what did not work? How do you iterate?

Felix Brooks-Church: Sanku is a product of 1,000 beautiful little mistakes. We were a startup. My co-founder at the time hired me out of Cambodia back in 2010. I had been working for four

years in Cambodia on a very small project, with about 100 street kids. This was in southern Cambodia, in a place called Sihanoukville. It's a port town with lots of tourists, but also a pretty shady place. These kids work all night collecting cans and selling bracelets. There's a lot of child abuse. There's a lot of pedophilia. I was trying to create a drop-in center, a safe place where these kids could get away from all that, come in, have drinking water, some food, and some basic educational classes. I was trying to rework them back into their homes and back into public school, and get them off the street and away from violence that four, five, and six-year-olds should not be facing.

That was also the first time I came face to face with malnutrition. These children were obviously stunted. They said they were 13, but they looked like they were nine. They'd have small cuts on their feet that would turn into massive infections. Some of them would pass away from malaria. These things shouldn't happen if you have a strong, well-developed immune system through better nutrition.

Around that time, I partnered with my co-founder. He's a graduate school professor at Stanford Business School. His name is David Dotson. He hired me to work on this problem of extending fortification, and the proven science of it, down to the grassroots level in rural East Africa. Here was a big problem, and we had a big idea. But we had to figure it out, and we had to move forward by failing forward and breaking things. It started with a one-way ticket to Nepal to invent a machine that could work at the small rural level and add these nutrients to common foods. We worked in Nepal because we had a partner there. We could be incubated and do the research and development through that project.

I spent two years banging out prototypes on dirt floor metal shops in Kathmandu. Nothing worked for two years until something did work. The first machine that worked didn't blow up. It accurately dosed these nutrients. We installed it in a hill village a couple of hours outside of Kathmandu. Once it worked, it was high-fives and tears. Then we said, "Okay, now we need to take this to a bigger market." That village in Nepal was called Sankhu. In honor of that first machine working, we named the organization Sanku. It was still just me and my partner David Dotson on this mission.

The next step was another one-way ticket, this time to Tanzania. The government invited us there to test this prototype. We made some really big, audacious promises, like we could install one in every village. We had one machine, and it worked, but we didn't have a team. I didn't have any staff. This is going back to 2013. The United States Agency for International Development [USAID] funded about 50 machines. I hired a couple of local staff and a couple of vehicles and

started slowly building Sanku into what it is today. We had a machine, but we didn't have a business model. Our first business model was very much the traditional business model. You try to sell machine equipment to a miller, and then you sell them the nutrients. Well, they didn't want to buy the equipment. They couldn’t afford it, so we donated it.

Then, over time, they didn't want to pay for the nutrients because neither could they absorb them or pass them on to their consumers, the mothers. That failed. We said, "Okay. If we're going to scale, we can't scale a business trying to sell a product to consumers who don’t want it, don’t understand it, or can’t afford it." We tried to be entrepreneurial and creative and figure out what the miller, who produces the flour, is already buying to run their business. How could we reduce costs or find efficiencies in their existing business and use that to offset this additional thing that we're trying to sell them?

We noticed that these millers buy empty flour bags to pack and sell flour. They were buying them locally, from middlemen, and the bags were bad quality and very expensive. We thought, "Let’s produce them ourselves." We built a factory, and we produced those bags. We saw economies of scale because we were cutting out middlemen, and while we put on a margin, that margin was enough to cover the nutrients. We’ve been able to sell the flour bags to millers at the same cost at which they were buying flour bags before, but now, bundled into that cost, are the nutrients. It's sustainable because they are buying the nutrients, but they're not feeling any financial burden because it's built into the margin. So now, the miller can produce a premium fortified healthy flour on the marketplace, market it better, and sell it to mothers, and the cost is the same as an unfortified, inferior product.

We achieve all this and we don't have to change any behaviors. Trying to convince 20 or 30 million mothers to buy something that's more expensive, and that they don't understand, is simply not going to work. The more behaviors you have to change, the harder it is to scale. That was our big aha moment. First, we built a machine, and now we've built a business model. But it took a lot of mistakes and failures over many years to get to that point. It's evened out. The sky isn't falling anymore. Now, it's time to step on the gas. We've got a lot of proven things in the works in all the countries we work in.

Going from 15 million people reached to 100 million people reached over the next five to seven years is not going to be easy, but the market is there. We have a proven model. Everybody wants this to work. It is now just about getting more financial support and more donors. We've built a big thirsty rocket, and it takes fuel. We need to get across this desert to this oasis of

sustainability because, I think, we can break even. We want to be free of philanthropy one day, but we have to get through that desert to that oasis of sustainability.

Alec Saelens: You're operating in a space where there is a sole product, while the sector that we are doing research for, child sexual abuse and violence, doesn't have a product that can be sold to address it. How do you approach these different issues, and what are the transferable lessons from your work that you can apply when looking at the child sexual abuse issue?

Felix Brooks-Church: We're working with communities that live on under a dollar a day. Eating healthy is expensive anywhere. Sitting in Brussels and eating healthy is expensive. You can go to McDonald's and have a cheap meal, or you can go eat healthy, but it's going to cost you more. We feel nutrition is a basic human right, and should not be something that's going to break the bank, especially for somebody living on under a dollar a day as a family. However, often, if they want to eat healthy, it's going to cost them more. So how do they get that money? A girl drops out of school. You can see where that potentially could lead the girl.

Ensuring that it's affordable to eat healthy results in smarter kids, with better immune systems, who can go to school. They can think and study and concentrate better and bring themselves out of poverty rather than go the other direction, to disparity, which might cause them to become sexual victims. We're hoping that's where nutrition can take these children: to a chance of prosperity. It's a loose connection, but there is definitely a connection there.

Alec Saelens: It goes back to what you were describing about your work in Sihanoukville, in Cambodia, providing kids with a good meal, and a drop-in center where they can be cared for and looked after. It helps them get out of situations where they might be prey to child sexual abusers of all sorts. It is a real component there.

Felix Brooks-Church: That work is continuing. There's a great organization called M'Lop Tapang, based in Sihanoukville. They're really taking on the role of child safety. They used to have these child-safe agents that they hired to go around at night and protect kids and look out for any issues. A couple of times, they used me to go undercover and pretend to be a tourist. They took me to brothels they thought had underage girls. I did this twice. I'd walk in there, pretending to be a customer and look around. Sure enough, there were girls who looked like they were 12 or 13. It was very emotional. I could only do it twice. I had to stop because it was so intense.

It exposed me to this underworld of sexual predators, pedophilia, and child trafficking. It's happening there. There are these beautiful beaches and a tourist environment. But if you just

scratch beneath the surface, unfortunately, there's this whole other world there. I fell in love with the idea of bringing safety and basic human rights to children. Nutrition, I feel, is one way to achieve that. It's something that I feel I have control over with this organization. But there are so many other organizations, like M'Lop Tapang, that are working really directly on child safety issues.

Alec Saelens: I'm interested in how you've changed social norms. What strategies have you found most effective in talking to people about the need for a different type of food consumption and helping them understand the value of what you're bringing them? What's worked best?

Felix Brooks-Church: Our strategy has always been to work through the government because that message should be institutionalized. On the ground, in the field, in these villages and towns, they have nutritionists. They have food and health workers. What we're really investing in, this year and moving forward, is instead of Sanku being the ones out there trying to convince people or educate people around better nutrition and diet diversification and things like that, is giving the government that role, and making sure they can own that because that's more sustainable. If Sanku leaves one day, we don't want that message to leave. We're trying to embed a lot of these improvements and messages through the government, maybe even investing in the government to run TV and marketing ads. Radio is a big communicator as well in these areas. If they can own that message now, they can own it forever.

Everybody eats maize flour. They cook it up like porridge. It's called ugali in some areas, or pap. It fills you up. It's a lot of carbs. But again, full bellies aren't enough. So we're improving that food and using it as a very efficient vehicle to get nutrients into people. But we're not trying to introduce a new food. There are people working on what's called diet diversification, trying to get people to eat more foods. But that work assumes that people have access to a variety of foods, which isn't always the case. Things are very seasonal. Things cost more at different times of the year. It's hard to eat healthy.

The guarantee for our work is that they're always going to be eating flour. Our strategy, call it short-term, is to make sure that the food they're eating has the nutrients they need. Other organizations are working on expanding diets or expanding access to other foods, as well. There's diet diversification, and there's also crop diversification. The combined efforts of us and other development partners over time will fix that. But it takes a lot of time, a lot of money, and a lot of government buy-in, as well.

Alec Saelens: How do you engage with governments on a purely operational level? What does it take to get the ear of the government and have them own the message?

Felix Brooks-Church: The first step is to hire a really good local government relations person. We have great ones in all three of the countries we work in. They come with experience and a network of connections because, with government relations, it really is who you know. I did my best in the early days trying to attend the meetings and make those connections. But that person has to be a national. Someone who went to high school with this guy, or who's a cousin of that guy. That opens doors and makes it easier to get higher up, to the decision-makers. That's one strategy. You have to have a team.

Number two is there are a lot of meetings. They could be National Fortification Alliance meetings, or nutrition steering committees, or school feeding panels. Whatever it is, make sure you always have a seat at that table because that table discusses issues and comes up with strategies and policies. We want to be a leader and move that in the right direction. Not just for us; we're not just trying to build a company. We're trying to build an industry. We're a social enterprise, and we want this to work for everybody involved in this space. We're advocating not just for Sanku as a company, but for fortification as an industry in general. Those are the two most efficient strategies to get your message across and make change through government relations: have the right staff and be at the right tables to influence.

Alec Saelens: Can you talk a bit more about your posture? You are well-rooted in the local context; you've hired local staff. But as a social enterprise created abroad, what do you need to be mindful of in order for your message and your credibility to really be understood?

Felix Brooks-Church: For us, it was important to localize Sanku. Yes, there's Sanku USA, which is a 501c3, but Sanku Tanzania, Sanku Kenya, Sanku Ethiopia, and hopefully many more in the future, are local for-profit companies.

The concept of social enterprise hasn't really been understood or accepted by governments in Eastern Africa. You're either an NGO or you're for-profit. You're either the UN or you're Coca-Cola. We can't be the UN because we're selling stuff. We're engaging in business, and we're creating revenue at the local level. We register as a for-profit company, we pay our taxes like a for-profit company, and that sends the message to the government that we're investing in the economy. We're starting a company. It's a local company, with proximate leadership. We hire from the communities that we're helping. All the directors and the executive levels of those companies are locals. Then, we're localizing the inputs too. Instead of buying these nutrients from Germany,

or Holland, or India, or China, we've produced and created the first-of-its-kind East African nutrient blending factory in Tanzania.

When we launched this back in June, we had the prime Minister of Tanzania, and about 100 dignitaries, at the ribbon-cutting ceremony. What I said then is that Sanku's great achievement is building an East African Tanzanian factory that produces nutrients for Tanzanian mills that produce fortified flour for Tanzanians, run by Tanzanians. That gives credibility to our work and shows that we're committed both to the work and to localizing the work. This isn't us power shooting in as foreigners. It's a local problem, and we want the solution to be owned by the locals and solved by the locals in parallel with the government, so it's sustainable. We're sending that localization message and that proximate leadership message to the government, as well.

Alec Saelens: Taking a broader perspective, I'm curious if you have insights or teachable lessons from your work that others who are working in this field, or in adjacent fields, would find valuable. What advice would you give to someone who wants to do similar work and set themselves up for success in the ways you've already been able to achieve?

Felix Brooks-Church: Part of our success is that we're doing something so unique, not many other people are doing it. We have a lot of value because if it's not Sanku, there's nobody else. Yes, we want to build an industry, so it's not just us. But in the early days, we had a lot of value because we were tackling such a specific issue and doing it in such a unique way. Problems are often really, really big. I would tell any other social enterprise to consider: What part of that problem can you own and slice out that differentiates you from all the rest? You don't want to replicate work that's already been done. Doing something that speaks to a specific problem makes you more attractive to the government. They pick you and invite you. Then, from day one, you have good alignment with and value to the government. They don't want to let you go, so they support you.

It's similar with donors. Donors often like to donate towards new things, but also things that have a lot of potential for scaled impact. It's one thing to grow. But are you having a growing impact? You could have a lot of great impact, but if you can't scale that, then it's hard to attract donors. I think you have to prove that something has an impact, that you can scale that impact and, hopefully, sustain that impact at scale.

If you're a social enterprise and you rely on grants and philanthropy like we do, get those first core donors. Once you get these core donors, develop those relationships. Don't just go out there trying to hunt a bunch of donors and then not really sustain and retain them.

The best fundraising strategy for us is for our donors to recommend us to other donors. Donors trust donors. But those relationships take years to grow. You have to be honest about your work, and you have to be honest about all your mistakes. I love having conversations with donors. The first thing I start with is where we've messed up and gone wrong, and what's not working. Then I'll talk about all the beautiful, cool things we're doing. It's about being honest and then growing your donor base around that honesty. It does work. That's the best method in my experience.

Alec Saelens: How do you relate to other actors who are working on those other slices of the problem? How do you partner with them? How do you collaborate? How do you create a larger movement to increase the visibility around the broader issue of nutrition?

Felix Brooks-Church: We've got some good friends in the development world. We're quite small. We have a staff of 100 in only three countries, and 98% are East African. That is relatively small. We have some development partners that are much more global, and who are working on multiple slices of the problem. Often, we come in as a sub and tackle what we work on, which is very specific, and they're the umbrella working on other things like, for example, better inputs for farmers, better storage for farmers, post-harvest loss issues, even climate change issues.

Our millers are completely dependent on the grain that's available. If they don't have available grain, they can't mill flour. If they can't mill flour, we can't fortify it, and people can't get it. It's all linked. There's a massive supply chain. Climate change issues, drought, and poor soil all relate to poor yields and depletion of intrinsic nutrients. It's all linked.

We have very strong partners like USAID, Feed the Future and the World Food Program [WFP]. We're partnering with them in Tanzania and Kenya to establish food school feeding programs and to get fortified flour to refugee camps. We're working with close to 400,000 refugees in Tanzania alone with this WFP partnership. TechnoServe does business solutions. They're amazing and train millers on policy work. Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition is another strong partner. Collectively, we're all taking on slices, and some are taking on more slices. We're definitely taking on a very specific slice, but we're not going to solve this by ourselves, no way, nor should we have to, nor do we want to. I'm very, very proud that we have these partners. When we go to these conferences and we have these workshops, we find good people working on big problems. I'm glad that Sanku has a place in that.

Alec Saelens: What does it take to create alignment where you understand everyone? Can you elaborate on the secret sauce that bonds you in looking in the same direction, and helps you avoid what can often be an issue in the development space of feeling like you're competing

with others around resources, particularly when it comes to government funding. How do you overcome that problem?

Felix Brooks-Church: That's a great question. I was at the UN General Assembly in New York in September, on a panel with William Warshauer, who's the CEO of TechnoServe, and someone I consider a friend, and the questions we were posed were all about that. How do you make a partnership work? We've both had other partners, and we both essentially agreed that if you have a partnership that's all about chasing money, about getting together and chasing a big grant for instance, it often doesn't work, or those partnerships are not as efficient– at least in my experience. If you lead with that, I think it has the wrong message and maybe it's doomed to fail.

What we've done and why our partnership with TechnoServe, as an example, is so successful is that, first of all, we have a very defined, very clear, and very complementary mission: to end malnutrition in our different ways. That is the basis of it. Once we established that we're mission-aligned, we asked: Are we both passionate about achieving that mission? Then, our teams started to work together. We have very similar cultures. We're both very field-based and scrappy. We're on the front lines. Our staff hangs out. They go out and have beers. They're friends. That's important. Through this shared culture, we've been able to scale, reaching millions of people across the region of East Africa, and now the money is starting to chase us. That's the irony. If you're really good at what you do, if you're a really aligned, well-oiled machine, you start to have an impact, you start to meet targets, and then, the money's going to come to you. I think it's about that. You've got to partner with people who you trust care about the issues as much as you care about the issues.

Alec Saelens: Thank you so much for your time, Felix.

Alec Saelens is a former journalist who supports SJN and its partners track solutions journalism's impact on society and the industry. In his former role, he researched and consulted on the connection between solutions journalism and revenue. He is co-founder of The Bristol Cable, the UK's pioneering local media cooperative. Before SJN, he was a researcher and coach for the Membership Puzzle Project and an analyst for NewsGuard.

***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*