

# WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES

AUGUST 2020

## LEADERS IN ACTION

*Bessie Schwarz*

*CEO and co-founder of flood mapping platform,  
Cloud to Street*



### JOURNEY OF A TECHNOLOGY ENTREPRENEUR

Bessie Schwarz is the CEO and co-founder of flood-mapping platform Cloud to Street, which helps governments, humanitarian organizations and insurers to effectively respond and prepare for flood disasters. Flooding affects more people than any other natural disaster but, by harnessing global satellites, advanced science and community intelligence, the company can monitor worldwide floods in near real-time and remotely analyze local flood exposure with ease. Founded by Bessie and Beth Tellman at Yale, and seed-funded by Google, Cloud to Street has been used by governments and companies in almost 20 countries.

#### What challenges do women entrepreneurs face?

As CEO of a company founded by two women, I am aware of how difficult it is for women to access the capital needed to start a business. Only 2.2 per cent of venture capital funding goes to women,<sup>1</sup> and having to couple this with raising money for a purpose-first organization has presented its share of challenges. Despite the barriers, we have been very lucky to have found amazing funders and social purpose investors in our journey.

*"The biggest lesson I've learned is to be honest and upfront about the mission and values of your organization when speaking to potential investors."*

While being uncompromising might deter some funders, it'll attract the right people, whose values are aligned with your companies, and will ensure that you stay close to your core mission as you grow your business.

## **What needs were evident which encouraged you to create your company?**

*"As a community organizer, I learned that, in times of environmental crisis, all existing social vulnerabilities are heightened. This was a driving factor for Beth and me when we started Cloud to Street and remains at the core of our work, which is to remove barriers to life-saving information."*

When environmental crises strike, it is the most vulnerable, women and girls, who feel the brunt of the impact – displacement, poverty, hunger, and the loss of life, income and property. Working directly with decision makers on the ground has allowed us to take a human-centred approach when building our tools. We listen to our users and customize the tools and support we provide to them based on the unique needs and challenges they face – empowering them to keep the most vulnerable parts of their populations safe.

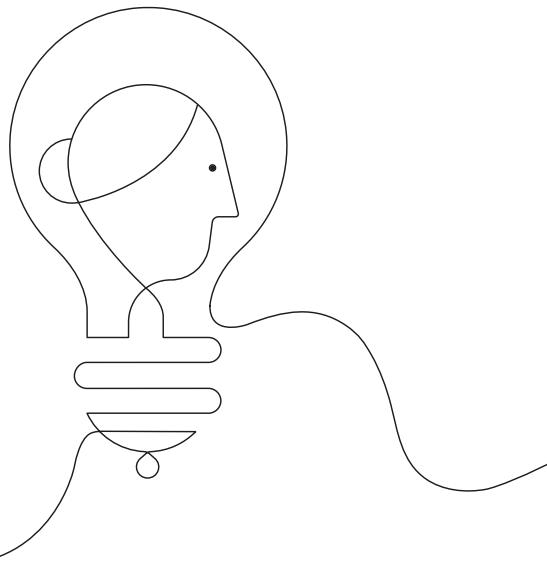
## **How do you envision scaling your business to positively impact women?**

Over half of the team at Cloud to Street are women, and our leadership team is 75 per cent female. Internationally, we have partnered with incredible women who are local flood managers, first responders and in technical hydromet offices around the world. Individualized workshops and trainings on flood information systems, coding, and remote-sensing science build their confidence and capabilities to serve their communities. We have plans to build on this work at a greater scale as we continue to grow as a company.

## **How does the Cloud to Street advance the Sustainable Development Goals?**

Every year, flooding affects more people than any other natural hazard, affecting each and every sustainable development goal on multiple and overlapping levels. The destruction of homes, property, infrastructure, businesses, and croplands lead to poverty, hunger, and threatens industry, innovation, and infrastructure.

By intervening in every stage of the disaster cycle around catastrophic flooding, Cloud to Street supports good health, education, clean water and sanitation, as well as programmes necessary for equality, equity, and relief.



*"Better planning and effective rebuilding from disasters promotes decent work and economic growth, industry, innovation, and infrastructure, and sustainability."*

Through transparent data-sharing and training programmes and WhatsApp groups we bring together officials working on flooding by region and watershed, not just country. A recent workshop brought together officials from Egypt, Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi, and Rwanda, which means we can bolster peace and justice, strong institutions and partnerships to achieve our goals.

## **How did you build the company?**

We had the idea to start Cloud to Street while Beth and I were graduate students at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. After watching a talk on Google Earth Engine, a remote-sensing cloud-processing platform, we immediately thought about communities that we had worked with during our community organizing days that lacked information about disaster risks. We thought if we could use a cloud-processing platform to get more information about the risk to climate-vulnerable communities, it could be a powerful tool for empowering people.

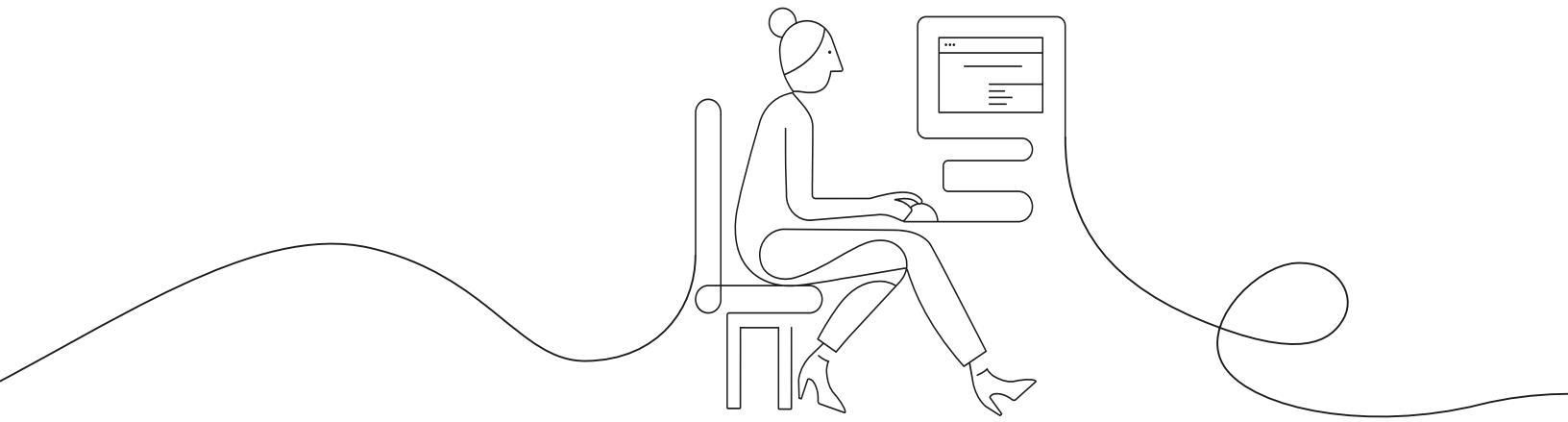
She and I started building the Cloud to Street algorithm, and were eventually connected to our first major partners, the World Bank, which kick started the business. We now work in 20 countries to provide governments and global insurers with the necessary data needed to relocate people at risk, rapidly target the distribution of millions of dollars of disaster aid, identify devastating floods, and offer insurance products in new areas.

## **How do you think being a signatory to the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) can help create positive action to support gender equality and the empowerment of women through business engagement?**

There is a lot of power that comes with a network of motivated and entrepreneurial-minded women – and this is what the WEPs' platform is helping to create. No one person or company will ever have all of the answers on their own, so being a part of a network of like-minded businesses can provide the fresh perspectives, tools and ideas that are necessary for building companies that create real impact.

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1. Emma Hinchliffe, "Funding for female founders stalled at 2.2% of VC Dollars in 2018", Fortune, 28 January 2019. Available at: <https://fortune.com/2019/01/28/funding-female-founders-2018/#:~:text=According%20to%20data%20from%20PitchBook%2C%20female%20founders%20received%202.2%25%20of,amount%20of%20VC%20investment,%20increases> (accessed 26 August, 2020).



## Women's Empowerment Principles



High-level corporate  
leadership



Employee well-being  
and safety



Supplier diversity  
& marketing practices



Workplace HR



Measurement and  
reporting



Education and training  
for women



Community  
engagement

[weps.org](http://weps.org)

[weps@unwomen.org](mailto:weps@unwomen.org)

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**WOMEN'S  
EMPOWERMENT  
PRINCIPLES**

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