

The Future We Want - Visioning Exercise for groups and communities

What Is? What If? What Next?

Brought to you by: Transition Together and Transition Network, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

This is a plaintext version of the [resource published here](#)

- [Introduction](#)
- [Who is this guide for?](#)
- [About 'What If?'](#)
- [How to use this guide](#)
- [Who to involve](#)
- [Ensuring everyone can participate](#)
- [Roles/Facilitation](#)
- [Preparing an online visioning process](#)
- [Preparing an in-person visioning process](#)
- [Introduction/Warm up](#)
- [Part one - What Is?](#)
- [Part two - What If?](#)
- [Follow up exercise - Optional](#)
- [Generating What If? questions](#)

- [From What If to What Next](#)
- [Closing Well](#)
- [Other resources](#)
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Introduction

We don't need to look far to find big challenges facing us now and in the future. Many people can't rely on the basic things we need for a safe and happy life. Our seas are polluted and nature under threat. Thinking about how to respond to the changing climate, inequality and uncertainty can be overwhelming.

Yet many people have a strong desire to be part of making change and building something better. What If... we could reimagine our future as thriving, fairer, more resilient, more connected? How could that vision help us to move forward and take practical action towards a better future?

This visioning guide is designed to help groups and communities open up their imagination and start exploring what a better future could look like in their context. It helps to build a shared vision of what's possible, a vital starting point to exploring how we can work together to make it a reality.

“What we cannot imagine cannot come into being.” bell hooks

Who is this guide for?

This guide is for any group that wants to expand their vision of what's possible in the future and explore how they want to work towards it.

It is designed for starting conversations within a local community and to create a space to hear different perspectives and needs. The exercise can also be used to investigate a single theme or issue, like food or transport, or by a group which isn't place-based but wants to reimagine the future of their area of interest - like the arts or youth provision.

If you are from a community group that wants to invite the wider community into this process you might like to do this exercise within your organisation first. This lets you become really familiar with it before running it with a bigger audience, but also allows your members to fully contribute and explore your priorities and focus in a deeper, richer way.

About Transition

This guide is based on the experience of the Transition movement, a network of community groups in 50 countries; people working together locally to address the big complex problems of our time. We do this by reimagining our local communities, and then taking practical action to help them become thriving, inclusive, more resilient places for everyone.

'Transition' simply means change and how we get from one thing to another – from a damaging, polluting, unequal present to a fairer, more resilient, regenerative future for all. There are some 300 local Transition groups in communities across the UK. They are supported by Transition Together in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and by Scottish Communities Climate Action Network ([SCCAN](#)) in Scotland.

This approach to visioning was developed during the global coronavirus pandemic and is inspired by Rob Hopkins' work around What If, and the [3 horizons framework](#)). This framework was developed to help navigate situations where there is a high level of uncertainty and also a high level of potential for change.

It's an approach that has been tried and tested by many local Transition groups working to take action from the ground up, and helped them go on to make changes in their community.

Find out more on Transition Together's website: <https://transitiontogether.org.uk>.

About 'What If?'

The **What If** exercise is a three-stage process that helps us to visualise and discuss the changes we want to see, for our community as a whole, or an area of specific focus on such as where we get our food or energy.

1. **What Is** - invites us to explore what's already happening, by unpacking what isn't working, what needs to change and what needs to be retained.
2. **What If** - is where we use our Time Machine to fire the collective imagination of the people present to come up with a vision of what could be.
3. **What Next** - explores the pathways that can get us from the **What If** ideas and questions we have generated, to some firm ideas for future actions.

This process enables collaboration, co-design and specifically allows for tensions to emerge. It helps us to explore different perspectives in our community, and means tensions can be worked through together to develop a sense of shared ownership and solidarity, setting the basis for future change to happen.

How to use this guide

This guide is designed to be used by anyone - even if you have limited experience of facilitating group discussions. It takes you step-by-step through the process, from planning and set-up, to what to say at each stage of the visioning exercise. It is a good idea to have a small group to prepare and run the event - see more on roles below. .

The visioning exercise is broken down into three sessions. In person, you could do this all in one day. If you are doing it online, a full day is not recommended - instead you could schedule three separate sessions to work through the exercise.

Here are our suggested timings, including short breaks:

- 1: Introduction and **What Is?** - 1 hour 45 minutes
2. **What If?** - 3 hours (add 30 minutes if you do the optional exercise)
3. What Next? and closing - 2 hours 15 minutes

The process can be run online or in person. There are pros and cons to each.

Online

- You will need: online tools for group video calls (like Zoom, Teams or Meet Coop) and creating shared notes, like Google Docs, Next Cloud or Miro. Consider cost as well as how familiar and accessible they are to your participants when deciding.
- Online meetings can be harder for some people to participate in, particularly if they struggle with computers or do not know the group as well.
- For other people, it can be easier to join from home, without needing to travel or arrange cover for caring responsibilities.
- It is best run in a series of separate sessions - a full day online is very draining for most people.

In Person

- You will need: a suitable venue, materials for capturing notes and ideas (like flipchart, large white boards or a roll of paper, pens and maybe sticky notes) and to think about providing some refreshments to sustain people's energy.
- It can take more time, effort and money to organise an in person event, and it is important to think about how to get people to engage and make sure they attend.
- It can be easier to connect, participate and have a deeper experience with other participants when you gather in person.
- It can run in a series of separate sessions or all in one day with breaks.

Whichever you choose, the following pages will help you plan and set up your event to try to overcome some of the challenges and so participants feel as comfortable as possible, and fully able to take part.

Who to involve

This is a key question to think about at the very start of your planning. Running this visioning process is a great opportunity to hear from a wide range of people in your community. In fact, you will discover new issues, priorities and perspectives which will add depth, richness and relevance to your vision if you have a great mix of people there.

It's also a chance to start building relationships with organisations and groups of people you haven't previously connected with. The process is designed to unearth different views and life experiences and to open up conversations around them, so be prepared to hear some new ideas about your community.

When thinking about who to involve, it can help to spend some time mapping who is active in your community. Transition Network has developed an exercise, called [The Big List](#) to help you do this. From this you can create a list of people to invite.

Be sure to give people plenty of notice and clear information, both practically about the sessions and about what the process involves. Make it clear this is an invitation to help shape a shared vision, rather than an ask to support your particular group or projects. Ask if there is anything that might help people to participate or access requirements so that you can remove as many barriers to engaging as possible.

Ensuring everyone can participate

You want this to be a positive, creative and meaningful experience for everyone who takes part. Thinking ahead also means that you can make sure everyone feels welcome, safe, fully involved and able to participate practically in these sessions.

- ☐ Give clear information in advance so people know what to expect
- ☐ Ask people when signing up if they have any accessibility or other needs to help them take part
- ☐ Online, advise people to plan ahead, join on a computer or tablet, rather than a phone, with a good, secure internet connection, a working webcam, and somewhere they feel comfortable with minimal distractions.
- ☐ Can you offer interpretation if you have many languages in your community? Who could help you do that locally?
- ☐ Offer the session free or as 'pay what you can' so money is not a barrier to taking part
- ☐ Whether on or offline, ensure there are plenty of breaks
- ☐ In person: is your venue accessible by public transport and for a wheelchair user, and a safe, welcoming space for everyone in your community?
- ☐ In person: offer refreshments to help people feel welcome - ask for dietary requirements and allergies in advance
- ☐ Online: offer guidance and support with using shared documents and the group call platform you choose.
- ☐ Online: use closed captions (and tell participants how to enable them) and make use of chat or slides to share questions or tasks.

☐ Use name labels in person and ask people to update their name online, and introduce themselves in the chat.

The following pages have more advice about how to set up and introduce your event well to get off to a great start.

Roles/Facilitation

Whether you are running your visioning exercise online or in person, it's good to have a small team of people involved in preparing and on the day. Aim to have one or more people in each of these roles:

Facilitation: It is vital to have at least one person to facilitate and lead the process, using this guide. You could have extra facilitators, if you have capacity, who could run different aspects of the session. You will need to familiarise yourself with the activity beforehand, but it's a reasonably easy exercise to facilitate.

Practical support: For an in person meeting, this involves looking after the venue, refreshments and welcoming participants. They can also help with small groups and ensuring everyone has paper for notes or anything else they need to take part. Online, you want someone to keep an eye on the technical aspects of your meeting - admitting participants, setting up breakout rooms, putting information in the chat and helping participants who have any issues with the platform.

Note taker/harvester: This is someone who would be responsible for capturing notes and also sorting responses into themes at certain points in the process.

It's good for the whole team to meet and go through the process thoroughly together in advance, to be clear who is doing what on the day.

Preparing an online visioning process

Ahead of time

If you have decided to hold your visioning process online, start by agreeing dates and timings. Next choose what platform you will use to hold the online meetings (eg Zoom, Teams or Meet.Coop). Ensure the person doing tech support has access and can create the online events and share the links with your team and participants.

Decide how people will indicate they are attending and any accessibility needs - by email? An online form? Or you could use a free online ticketing system.

Send out your invitations with the following details:

- What you are inviting people to (use the text in this document if it helps)
- Date and time sessions
- That it's free or pay-what-you-can to take part
- How to sign up and if there is a deadline (or send the link to join the sessions if you decide not to have a sign up method)
- Can you add a link to more information/support on using Zoom or the alternative platform you've chosen?
- Explaining that you will be recording the session, if you have decided to.

Plan to send out the links to join the call to participants ahead of time, and follow up with a last minute reminder a day or two beforehand.

The team running the exercise should run through it in detail beforehand. Note where you would like to share information in chat and where you need breakout rooms. Set up an online shared document for notes. It can be helpful to create a document with all the links and messages you know in advance you will want to share in one place .

On the day

The team running the exercise should arrive early, settle in and go over any last minute questions. You could open the call a little early for anyone who wants to check they can log in or who wants a bit of extra support. Indicate who can give tech support if people have problems or questions about how to use the platform.

Invite everyone to rename themselves as they join with their name, the pronouns they choose to use and if relevant, the group they are part of. Now you are ready to get started.

Preparing an in-person visioning process

Before you send invitations, decide whether you will run it in person or online. If in person, look for a suitable venue, which is accessible for wheelchair users and by public transport, and a safe and welcoming place for everyone in your community. What size of venue do you need? Do you have enough budget to pay - or who might be able to give a free or low cost venue?

What date and time will suit the widest range of people you want to attend? Consider also whether you can provide childcare or lunch/refreshments.

Decide how people will book and let you know of any accessibility needs or dietary requirements - by email? An online form? Or you could use a free online ticketing system.

Send out invitations, including:

- What you are inviting people to (use the text in this document if it helps)
- Date, time and cost of sessions
- That it's free or pay-what-you-can to take part
- How to sign up and if there is a deadline
- Any information they need about the venue and how to get there

Consider in advance how you will prepare and lay out the space in your venue to make everyone feel welcome, comfortable and creative. Steer away from rows of seats with desks, which could put people in school or work mode - a circle of chairs or tables with seats grouped around them has a much more open and collaborative feel.

Make a list of the materials you will need to gather to capture notes and ideas, including large sheets of paper or whiteboards and colourful pens. Post-it notes or small dot or star stickers are helpful for some of the exercises but not essential. Name stickers or badges can help to break the ice in a larger group.

On the day

The team running the exercise should arrive early, settle in and make sure the space is set up as you would like it. Be clear who and how you are welcoming people. Show people where to find water, bathroom facilities and refreshments. Now you are ready to get started.

Introduction/Warm up

Time: 30 minutes

The first half hour of this process is really important to set the tone, make everyone feel comfortable and break the ice - at least some people won't know each other.

Introduce yourselves - the team running the sessions.

Give a brief overview of the whole session:

- Introductions - where we get to know each other a little.
- What Is: Taking Stock - where we will explore together what's currently happening now in our communities.
- What If- creating a vision together for our community.
- From What If to What Next - exploring how we make our vision a reality.

Give everyone the opportunity to introduce themselves. How you do this will depend on the size of the group. If it's small, you can go around and invite each person to share a bit about themselves and why they are coming individually. If the group is quite large, you could just share names and one word to describe how you are feeling today or share more in smaller groups initially.

You could pick one of these questions to break the ice:

- Something about themselves (this could be the area they live in if you are doing this in a local community or the organisation they feel most connected to).
- Your favourite thing about your place/community.
- What you had for breakfast
- One thing that excites you about transition

Part one - What Is?

Time: 1 hour 25 minutes

Taking stock of what's not working, what we want to change and what we want to retain

Facilitation guide:

Introduce the aim, mindset and exercise as set out below.

Aim:

- To explore what activities are currently helping us create a sustainable, resilient and socially just community, as well as what is stopping us doing this.

Mindset:

- Each person only has one part of the picture, so be open to other views to develop a more complex and realistic overview and accept that we can never know everything.
- Understand that each person's perspective of the local community at present, what needs to change and what needs to stay the same, helps us to find better solutions.
- Different perspectives are fine even if they are in tension as life is complex! The key is how we navigate those tensions together.

Go through the following exercise then put people into small rooms in groups of 3-5 people for 60 minutes (ideally 20 minutes for each of the 3 areas). Every 20 minutes, prompt the groups to move on to the next area.

What Is exercise:

The idea of the What Is exercise is to work in small groups to take stock of the world that exists around us at this point in time. In order to do this explore the following three areas and capture the main points in your shared notes. It is possible and completely fine for some local projects or organisations to appear in more than one list.

- **Resilience:** What are the things around you that contribute to the resilience of that place? What have you seen, during times of crisis or shock - such as extreme weather, the Covid pandemic or disruption to services or supplies - that have enabled the community to support itself? How has your community been able to manage those shocks and to rebuild itself afterwards?
- **Relinquish:** What are the things in your community that simply no longer have a place if we are to move towards a low carbon, more connected and just future? What do we need to let go of, to leave behind, to put to one side?
- **Restore:** What needs to be put into place in order to repair the damage that has been done to our place by climate change, by austerity, inequality, biodiversity loss and so on? What are the things that already exist in this place that represent the process of restoration or have a key role to play in that process?

By the end of this exercise, you will have created a kind of inventory of the place you live in today, of its seeds of hope, the things that are actively driving us closer to disaster, the building blocks on which the future needs to be built.

In person: Introduce the exercise all together, then invite people to form small groups where they are sitting, to respond to the three topics below. Make sure each group has pens and paper to capture their notes. After 60 minutes, join back together and invite people to take some time to walk around and read each other's notes. If you have time, gather once more and ask people what they're noticing - such as patterns, similarities or key themes'

Online: After introducing the exercise, put people into breakout rooms of 3-5 people. Share the three topics below (resilience, relinquish, restore) in the chat or on slides, so people can refer back to them during the discussion. Make sure people have access to a shared document for notes. After 60 minutes, bring people back into the main session, and invite each group to briefly feed back.

Part two - What If?

Time: 3 hours with breaks

Starting to imagine a different, better future together.

Facilitation guide:

1. Introduce the aim and mindset of this session.

Aim:

- To use your collective imaginations to bring to life the future that may yet be possible.

Mindset:

- It is fine for there to be multiple visions - they can potentially coexist with each other.
 - We need to cultivate, in our groups, a culture of 'Yes, And' rather than 'Yes, But'.
 - Seek out the ways that different visions could compliment each other.
2. Run through the following guided visioning Time Machine exercise below, to travel ten years in the future.

This will take about 25 minutes. Option: to help people fully enter into the time machine exercise, you might like to invite the group to make a collective hum or add a short sound effect like [this](#).

In-person: Ask participants to pair up before you start the Time Machine exercise. This allows them to move smoothly into sharing straight afterwards.

Online: Run through the Time Machine script first. Then put people into breakout rooms in pairs and give the instructions for sharing.

Guided visioning process: How to use your Time Machine to travel forward 10 years:

Invite the whole group to get comfortable, to take a deep breath and, if they would like, to close their eyes.' Then one of you can read out the following, or something similar:

“In a moment we are going to take a journey through time. This is a historic moment, the first time in [insert name of your community] that an act of collective time travel has been attempted. I have with me here my Time Machine that I built during lockdown from bits I had at home and using plans I found online. When I turn it on, we are going to travel 10 years into the future. The times we travel through, were the times of the most profound and remarkable transition in human history. Change that in 2024 felt unimaginable happened in in positive and accelerating cascades. Institutions that felt so permanent crumbled and fell, and new, infinitely better ones bloomed in their place.

Those 10 years were the most thrilling time to be alive. They are times that those that came afterwards told great stories about and sang great songs about. I am turning this Time Machine on and we are travelling forwards together. Let's step out, emerging blinking into this new world. It's not a Utopia, but it is the result of everything that could possibly have been done, being done. Take a walk around it in your imagination using all your senses.”

You then 'turn on' your Time Machine and leave people sitting in silence for 8 minutes to explore the future apart from an occasional prompt, with long pauses between, such as.

- What do you see as you walk around?
- What sounds do you hear?
- What does it smell like, feel like, taste like?
- What are people doing for work and leisure?

3. After this time to explore in silence, gently invite people to stay in this future place and transition to discussing in pairs the world they have imagined.

Take 12 minutes for this sharing. Invite them to take 3 minutes each to listen to the other without comment, then take 6 minutes to discuss what has come up and note down two delicious ideas they would like to share with the wider group.

4. Then bring everyone back together and state that

“Now we're going to leave this place, taking away a sense of what's possible and what's important. Let's get back in our Time Machine and travel back to the present. When you are ready, open your eyes and reconnect to the people you are with today.”

5. Allow 20-30 minutes for this step. Ask people to take a couple of minutes to look at what has been noted down by participants.

Then ask if anyone would like to hear more about a specific idea, and give the person whose idea it was a minute or two to explain it in a bit more detail. Aim to hear more about the ideas of several participants. By the end of this people should have a pretty good overview of a range of imaginative visions for their community.

Take a break to let the vision settle in. If you are running the visioning process over one day, this may be a good point for lunch.

Follow up exercise - Optional

Time: 30 minutes

Once you have done this visioning piece, you can do this additional exercise to go deeper into the visioning process. If you don't have time on the day, keep these questions to return to later.

Facilitation guide:

Explain that they are now going to explore this future vision in more detail by focusing on specific questions in small groups:

Put into small groups of 3-5 people for 15 minutes. Ask the groups to focus on one of the following statements and discuss it and capture the main points that come up. Then bring groups back and get them to report back, taking no more than a minute or two to share what they came up with.

Select a few of these questions and ask different small groups to consider one each:

- Which policies were introduced today that accelerated our journey to this future?
- What are the values that underpin the world we imagined in 10 years time?
- What jobs are you doing in this world? What does the economy around it look like?
- What were the projects and the movements today that inspired and informed this shift?
What were the key sources of inspiration?
- What changes were made to the education system that enabled this shift?
- What supported people to come together to make these changes happen?
- Are there any devices or objects or tools that didn't exist today but which are now essential parts of life?
- Invent some newspaper headlines from the future, what positive stories would they be telling?

Generating What If? questions

Time: 60 minutes

Facilitation guide:

Introduce the session using the following text:

The previous exercise was all about expanding the imagination, allowing ourselves to create new 'memories of the future' in order to create a 'North Star' to move towards. But how do we give this solid form, to ground it in reality? Through the generation of good What If questions, that's how.

What makes a good What If question? The former Mayor of Bogota, Antanas Mockus, beautifully described it like this:

“What people love most is when you write on the blackboard a risky first half of a sentence and then recognise their freedom to write the other half”.

Explain that we will now create the What If questions that people asked today that were pivotal in unlocking the future vision that they just explored.

1. Encourage them to make the questions quite specific, not general things like “What if everyone loved each other?”, but more specific questions that relate to changes that can be initiated at community scale, such as “What if all our parks had community gardens?”, “What if every street had a car club?” or “What if we decided on part of the council budget spend?”.
2. Explain that it is really important at this point to distinguish between ‘Yes, But’ and ‘Yes, And’. For so many of us, our experience of imagining new ideas and suggesting them is that they are met with a ‘Yes, But’ response, detailing all the potential problems, which shuts down our imagination. In theatrical improvisation, ‘Yes, And’ is vital. Someone makes an ‘offer’, a suggestion, and the next person accepts that

and builds on it. It creates a completely different atmosphere, as ideas emerge and are nourished and respected. So make it clear that when a 'What If' suggestion is made, 'Yes, but' is banned. Instead, people are invited to respond with 'Yes, and' suggestions.

3. Put people into small groups of 3 - 5 people for 40 minutes, and ask them to capture the What If questions that emerge on paper or a shared document.
3. Bring everyone back together and then have a 15 minute break - encourage everyone to move around, even to go outside for a bit.
4. Over the break go through notes made and group the What If questions into themes for use in the next exercise. This means that the note-taker will not get a break at this point.

From What If to What Next

Time: 1 hour 45 minutes

Facilitation guide:

Introduce the aim, mindset and exercise

Aim:

- To explore how to make our vision a reality.

Mindset:

- We don't drive forward from the present with its current mindset, which is the cause of a lot of the problems we face. Instead, we position ourselves in the future and let the better world emerge from that perspective.
- There will be tensions, but they can be resolved through dialogue and collaboration.
- Think both/and rather than either/or.

You will by now hopefully have a wealth of What If questions grouped together into themes. But which ones have the potential to become viable strong initiatives, and around which is there most energy in your group to make them a reality. To work this out, explain that everyone has 3 stars or dots that they can put against a 'What If' area they would like to focus on - they can add more than one star to an area if they think it's really important. Give everyone 10 minutes to look through the questions and add their stars or dots.

In person: Invite people to move around view the list on one or more pages, either displayed on the wall or floor. You can use small star or dot stickers, or just invite people to draw with

pen next to the idea they want to focus on.

Online: Ensure everyone can access the shared document you are using at the right place. Invite people to add three asterisks * to the ideas they want to focus on.

4. Then spend 10 minutes as the whole group to decide which of the popular themes to focus on in smaller groups for the rest of the session - the number of stars next to a theme should help guide this. There can be more than one theme to focus on.
5. Be clear that this stage is crucial, as the next steps that come out of this exercise will help to make your vision a reality. Place people in small groups based on the theme (or themes) for 60 minutes. As far as possible, let people choose which theme they are drawn to - these may be the people who continue to work in this area.

Online: An easy way to let people choose a breakout room is to ask them to rename themselves in zoom based on the area of focus, e.g. "Transport Tom", and manually assign them to rooms.

Explain that they should spend 15 minutes on each of the following questions in order to come up with some next steps/actions to make them happen which they should note. You might suggest a stretch half way through. Emphasise this is about next steps, not designing a whole project and that it will form their action plan.

1. Who do we need to get round the table to make it happen?
2. What resources do we need to do this?
3. What could we do now?
4. What are our immediate next steps, what will we do tomorrow?

Then bring people back together and have a 5 minute break and spend 15 minutes hearing each group feedback their next steps to the wider group.

Closing Well

Time: 30 minutes

Close with appreciation (giving everyone time to share what they have appreciated about the time together) and a celebration of what an imaginative bunch you all are and how much you achieved in these sessions!

1. Recognise that you have come up with a load of great ideas that can be taken forward when you do the visioning exercise with the wider community, as well what you could do now.
2. You can do a quick go around where you ask everyone to state one thing they have really appreciated about the session and one thing that they found challenging about the process.
3. Be sure to say something about what will happen to the notes and ideas generated. You may not know exactly what the next steps will be - but let people know if it will be written up or shared in some form, if there will be future meetings or activities to continue the exploration.
4. Thank everyone for joining in and welcome feedback so you can learn more about how it was for participants and if/how they'd like to continue to be involved.

We'd love to hear about your visioning process, what emerges from it and any feedback so we can improve it in the future. Please drop us a line at training@transitiontogether.org.uk.

Other resources

Transition Together offers training and support to help you put your vision into action, as well as stories of what other communities are doing to change their world.

Visit our website for more information: <https://transitiontogether.org.uk/>

You can also connect with others working for community-led change on our Vive platform, a free, easy-to-use, ethical online space to share ideas, questions and collaborate. Get started here:

bit.ly/joinvive

You might find these particularly useful as you think about how to build on your visioning exercise:

<https://transitionnetwork.org/resources/visioning-post-transition-future-activity/>

<https://transitionnetwork.org/resources/producing-timeline-activity/>

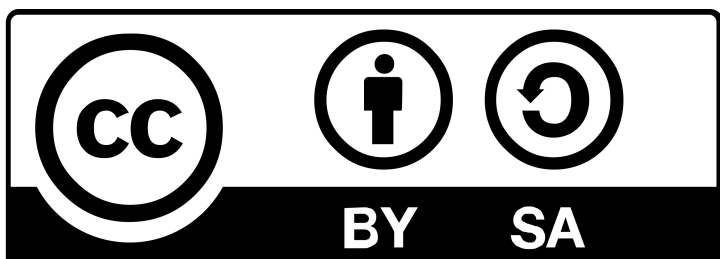
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