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Although adaptations to climate are an ancient social activity, policies and programmes for adapting to climate change are relatively recent phenomena. Despite this relative newness, climate change adaptation has been a dynamic field, undergoing a range of changes during its existence. Here we provide an overview of several key influences on this development with a particular interest in the political dimensions. We begin by examining some of the factors behind the emergence of political interest in adaptation, including the recognition of traditional and indigenous knowledge and the calls for community-based adaptation. Science has provided an understanding of climate change impacts and has been the foundation of the adaptation response by governments, business, NGOs and others. Questioning the hegemonic role given to science is another of the emerging political considerations in the discourse. Climate change adaptation has also merged with the field of disaster risk reduction and that of sustainable development. Neoliberalism is also an important source of political values and political discourse for climate change adaptation is discussed. We also discuss the impact of neoliberalism on adaptation policy and practice (i.e., 'apolitical' economic and scientific rationalities). Accordingly, the relationships with other discourses have implications for the identity of climate change adaptation. These developments have implication for a range of institutional, social and cultural issues, including regulatory frameworks, policy instruments, administrative procedures and coordination between sectors and actors, and social/ political opportunities and barriers.

Towards what futures? The political dimensions of sustainable development and resilience