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# Tear down these data walls... for research, the climate, and humanity

Sharing and preserving data is of vital importance — not just for research, but also for society as a whole. The hard-won gains of today's researchers must be accessible to the researchers of tomorrow.

## Speed read

- The Research Data Alliance (RDA) was launched in 2013.
- The organization works to improve sharing of research data.
- The RDA Sixth Plenary Meeting will be held in Paris, September 23-25, 2015.
- Mark Parsons, the RDA's secretary general, tells *The Science Node* about "the social and technical bridges" the organization is building.

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**Andrew Purcell**  
European editor

## The



*“To address any complex problem, you need to be able to integrate data across disciplines and cultures,” says Parsons. Image courtesy Alan Decker / RDA.*

*Research Data Alliance (RDA) — an organization supported by funding bodies in Europe, US, and Australia — is dedicated to making research data more accessible. iSGTW first spoke to their secretary general, Mark Parsons, just over 18 months ago. Now, with the RDA Sixth Plenary Meeting just a few days away, we decided our first-ever issue of the Science Node would be an excellent opportunity to catch up...*

### Why is data sharing important?

In order to effectively address the grand challenges of society, researchers and innovators need to be able to share data. To address any complex problem, you need to be able to integrate data across disciplines and cultures. Data sharing is essential to advancing human knowledge.



RESEARCH DATA ALLIANCE

6th RDA

Plenary

Paris

23rd

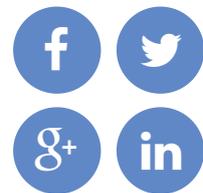
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More broadly though, assertions — no matter what field they're made in — need to be backed up by data. Data sharing is a great way of testing assertions and keeping us all honest.

## How is the RDA working to improve things?

We're building social and technical bridges to address the problems that currently exist when it comes to sharing data. To date, we've produced [about a dozen major deliverables](#) that touch on issues ranging from citation of dynamic datasets and handling of persistent identifiers to specific ways of describing wheat data.

However, the greatest value produced by the RDA to date is undoubtedly the community that has rapidly grown up around our work. People can share problems and ideas, and learn invaluable lessons from one another's experiences.

Our community is now building towards a critical mass, with more and more links developing between the solutions produced by each of the RDA's many working groups. We've also helped to put these data-related issues on the political agenda.

**The theme of the RDA Sixth Plenary Meeting is 'enterprise engagement'. Why is it important for RDA to work with actors in the private sector?**

Australian  
National Data  
Service (ANDS)

Research Data  
Alliance (RDA)

data  
preservation

open data

open science

Paris

France

Mark Parsons

climate change

environment

business

enterprise  
engagement

Well it's not just public sector organizations that are addressing grand societal challenges; private companies are also doing this, too. Equally, if we want the solutions that we produce to be adopted and to take off as standards, we can't afford not to reach out to the private sector. Just look at the web for example: it was created to transform scholarly communication and has ended up transforming almost everything!

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*The Research Data Alliance is supported by the Australian Commonwealth Government through the Australian National Data Service, the European Commission through the RDA Europe projects, and the US through the the National Science Foundation and other agencies.*

*The organization has 3,243 total members from 103 countries:*

- *50% Europe*
- *36% North America*
- *6% Asia*
- *4% Australasia*
- *3% Africa*
- *1% South America*

*Members come from academia, government/public service, small and medium sized enterprises, IT consultancy/development, large enterprises, policy/funding agencies, the press and media, and other areas.*

complex, interdisciplinary challenge, with data sets from many different fields needing to be integrated in order to take effective action. While the RDA as an organization doesn't have a specific focus on climate change (or any other research topic), this

Climate  
change  
is a  
hugely

really is a ‘poster child’ issue when it comes to the sort of grand societal challenges I mentioned earlier.

That being said, lots of the RDA’s work has the potential to help support efforts to better understand and tackle climate change. For example, we’ve recently established a new interest group focused on ‘data rescue’. Given that Earth observations are unrepeatable, this work is of particular relevance to climate change. The more historical data you have to help you understand the Earth’s climate, the better.

We’ll also be announcing the winners of our ‘[Climate Data Challenge](#)’ at next week’s event. This competition was designed to connect climate-related data sets with companies that may have practical applications for them. The winners will be given the opportunity to present their solutions at [the United Nations Climate Change Conference \(COP21\) in Paris](#) later this year.

## **Finally, why should people come to the RDA Sixth Plenary Meeting?**

The conference will certainly be fun. The best way to understand the RDA is really to come along and see it in action, as well as taking part yourself. These events are always very dynamic and involve lots of discussions within and between the organization’s various interest and working groups.

Frankly, it's often a little chaotic, but lots of exciting work gets done.

We encourage data practitioners from all fields to come to the event with their problems. Hopefully, you'll find others who are experiencing the same challenges, and you may even find some solutions at the event. Help us to improve research data sharing.

*Find out more about the RDA Sixth Plenary Meeting [here](#).*

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