RDA Sustainability – Thoughts

Below are a number of informal thoughts about the medium to long-term sustainability of the Research Data Alliance. To be as concrete as possible, I have given a number of examples from my own direct experience.
I am also guided by Leif's "top 3 wish-list" to the RDA (EU) Synchronisation Assembly.

Although there are a number of existing activities regarding RDA Sustainability, including those focusing on e.g. RDA EU and RDA US, I believe that it is important to first understand "the big picture" before seeing how regional funding can support such a vision.

Much of what is below has been stated before in various fora – this is an attempt to bring together the various thoughts into a cohesive whole focusing on this long-term vision.

Wish-list

The 3 items on my wish-list – all inter-related – are:

1. Bi-directional engagement;
2. Collaboration (versus "coordination");
3. Training, education and development.

Bi-directional engagement

To have a long-term future "the RDA" needs to engage not only with organisations (e.g. through the Organisational Assembly) but also with projects of all sizes. This is an area where a "one-size-fits-all" approach cannot work: engaging with e.g. the SKA or HL-LHC is a totally different thing than engaging with "the individual scientist in the wet-lab" (aka "the long-tail of science"). Large(r) projects and/or organisations may be able to afford people who have the role of liaising with the RDA, participating in and/or initiating working and interest groups. As one reaches out into the long tail this becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible.
This engagement has to be bi-directional in the sense that one must not only gain the engagement *of* these projects / organisations / scientists but one must also engage *with* them.
A concern under both engagement as well as collaboration (next) is accountability and transparency. An example of things that I do not find transparent are the RDA bi-annual "chairs" meetings:
- How is the choice of venue made?
- Why have meetings only been held in the US (the same location?) and Europe, whereas for other meetings, e.g. plenaries, there is great emphasis on rotating through all geographic regions.

Other issues that have been raised to me include the choice of who receives funding assistance to attend RDA events. (These issues and others have been discussed in the OAB Value and Engagement Group and no doubt elsewhere. I don't feel that they have been satisfactorily resolved).

Collaboration

In a field such as High Energy Physics, collaboration is key. Yes, there are formal structures, bodies and meetings but "we all know" that things would not get done unless we work together in a collaborative – not coordinated or controlled – manner on a largely common goal. We are trusted and empowered: such an environment is not only scalable (coordination has strict and obvious limits) but fosters innovation. Could Sir Timothy have come up with the Web if his every move was "coordinated"?

Building collaboration takes effort, trust, transparency, engagement, vision and more. Yes, it is important to set direction: in the Worldwide LHC Computing Grid (WLCG) this was done both formally through "the Collaboration Board" as well as informally (and IMHO as I was involved) much more effectively through the "Collaboration Workshops", held all around the world, just like RDA plenaries, to build and foster the things mentioned above.

In my current work (Data Preservation for HEP) I have just finished a draft of an article that will appear in a future version of the CERN Courier. This outlines a vision and timeline for DP in HEP, indicating where we want to be prior to the next update of the European Strategy for Particle Physics (ESPP), expected around 2018 / 2019. This involves things like Certification of Digital Repositories (maybe for "all CERN", which would involve much more than just the scientific data from the LHC), Data Management Plans, Reproducibility, Data Sharing and Open Data and more. Sounds a bit like at least some of the RDA goals. If we *collaborate* we can all benefit. (Others in the RDA can benefit from our activities, such as workshops, experience, even tools and services, as we have and hopefully will continue to from theirs).

(I can share this article once it has been approved as it has implications at the CERN policy level).

Training, Education and Development

For me, this is not only "the killer app" of the RDA but a possible way of engaging with "the truly long-tail" of science. At least some basic skills need to be included in the standard curricula if one is to reach our friend in the wet-lab.
Partly as I am running out of steam but more importantly as I feel others can articulate both the needs and benefits of these activities I will stop here, hoping to have providing enough input for further thought and discussion.