

# Making RDA truly global

advancing engagement, adoption and implementation in African library communities

**Getaneh Alemu**  0000-0003-2424-1725

Wider Community Engagement Officer (WCEO), RDA Steering Committee

Cataloguing & Metadata Librarian, Southampton Solent University

Received: 17 June 2026 | Published: 22 June 2026

## ABSTRACT

RDA is an international metadata standard providing structured entities, elements and guidance for creating interoperable, user-focused resource descriptions aligned with linked data models ([ALA Digital Reference, 2019-](#)); however, adoption remains uneven, as many African libraries continue to rely on AACR2 or hybrid practices due to resource limitations, infrastructure challenges, limited training and reduced participation in standards governance ([Aboyade and Eluwole, 2018](#); [Ahonsi, 2014](#); [Xaba and Shongwe, 2025](#); [Yeboah, Onyanha and Mhlongo, 2023](#)).

This article draws on three sources of evidence: a review of African empirical studies on RDA adoption, analysis of the 2026 African RDA Engagement Survey (109 respondents from 16 countries) conducted by the author as Wider Community Engagement Officer (WCEO) and field observations from professional engagement and a hybrid metadata workshop held at the UN Economic Commission for Africa Library in Addis Ababa on February 12th 2026, providing qualitative insight into conceptual understanding and cataloguing practice in contexts with limited access to the RDA Toolkit.

Survey findings show that 33.3% of institutions report using RDA, only 11.2% have subscription access to the Official RDA Toolkit, and 75% of self-reported RDA users lack Toolkit access. Despite these constraints, 82.6% of respondents express willingness to coordinate national or regional engagement. With the Original Toolkit retiring in 2027, targeted intervention is urgent. The paper positions the WCEO as an operational mediator between global governance and local implementation, aligning modular training, Train-the-Trainer pathways, viable Toolkit access models, and structured representation in RSC processes to support equitable and sustainable RDA adoption.

**KEYWORDS** RDA; RDA Toolkit; AACR2

**CONTACT** Getaneh Alemu  [getaneh@rdatoolkit.org](mailto:getaneh@rdatoolkit.org), [getaneh.alemu@solent.ac.uk](mailto:getaneh.alemu@solent.ac.uk)  RDA Steering Committee, Southampton Solent University

## 1. Introduction: a global standard with uneven reach

RDA was developed to replace AACR2 and to align bibliographic description with the IFLA Library Reference Model. Its entity-based structure, emphasis on relationships and compatibility with linked data environments make it suitable for multilingual, digital and interoperable metadata ecosystems. In principle, RDA is a global standard. In practice, its uptake remains geographically uneven.

Studies from Nigeria, South Africa and Ghana consistently indicate high awareness of RDA and generally positive professional attitudes, yet limited systematic implementation ([Aboyade and Eluwole, 2018](#); [Oguntayo and Adeleke, 2016](#); [Xaba and Shongwe, 2025](#); [Yeboah, Onyanacha and Mhlongo, 2023](#)). Across these contexts, common barriers include financial constraints, unstable ICT infrastructure, limited access to the Official RDA Toolkit, insufficient structured training and weak participation in standards governance ([Aboyade and Eluwole, 2018](#); [Ahonsi, 2014](#); [Yeboah, Onyanacha and Mhlongo, 2023](#)). Evidence from Nigeria similarly shows that, despite widespread awareness and positive perceptions, RDA adoption remains limited, underscoring the need for sustained training, institutional support and strong senior management buy-in to enable effective implementation ([Bamidele, Madukoma and Onoyeyan, 2020](#)).

The planned retirement of the Original RDA Toolkit in 2027 heightens these disparities. Institutions that have not migrated to the Official Toolkit risk marginalisation from evolving metadata ecosystems that increasingly assume RDA-aligned description. The issue is therefore not simply a technical transition but structural inclusion. This article argues that RDA adoption in Africa is fundamentally socio-technical. The central constraint is not professional resistance but systemic capacity.

## 2. Methodology: literature, survey and field engagement

The present article draws on three complementary forms of evidence. First, it uses a structured review of empirical studies on RDA awareness, readiness and implementation in Africa, particularly those focused on Nigeria, South Africa and Ghana, in order to identify recurring challenges and sectoral variations. This body of literature provides longitudinal context and identifies persistent structural barriers.

Second, it analyses the 2026 African RDA Engagement Survey, an online instrument that collected 109 responses from cataloguers, LIS lecturers, national libraries, public libraries and association officers across sixteen African countries. The survey explored current RDA usage, Toolkit access, training needs, willingness to coordinate national efforts and perceived obstacles. It offers more recent comparative evidence than much of the published literature and captures perspectives from countries that remain underrepresented in scholarly discussions.

Third, the article incorporates field observations from onsite engagement in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Between 29 January and 2 February 2026, I facilitated a hybrid metadata workshop at the UN Economic Commission for Africa Library. Attendees included librarians from regional universities, national institutions and UN agencies. Their questions, system demonstrations and practical discussions provided qualitative insight into systems readiness, conceptual understanding and the lived experience of cataloguers working without consistent access to the RDA Toolkit.

Taken together, these three strands produce a multi-layered view of uneven adoption and clarify why the Wider Community Engagement Officer (WCEO) role must function as an operational mediator between global governance and local implementation.

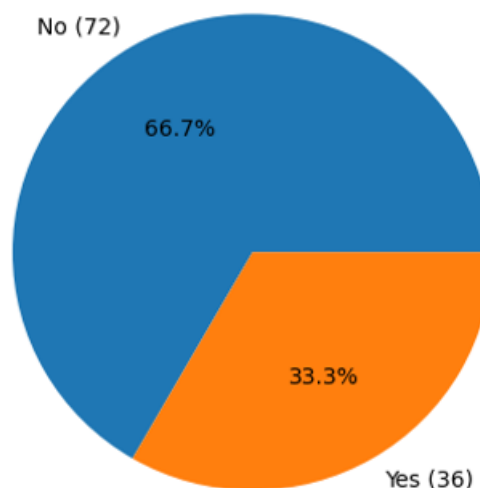
The survey is not statistically representative, as participation was based on professional networks, LinkedIn outreach, workshop attendees and association contacts, introducing potential self-selection bias and likely overrepresenting practitioners already engaged with RDA or working in comparatively well-resourced institutions such as the United Nations Library in Addis Ababa and some South African libraries. Nevertheless, the dataset's geographic reach and professional diversity provide valuable insight into patterns of adoption and implementation readiness across varied contexts.

### 3. Descriptive statistical findings

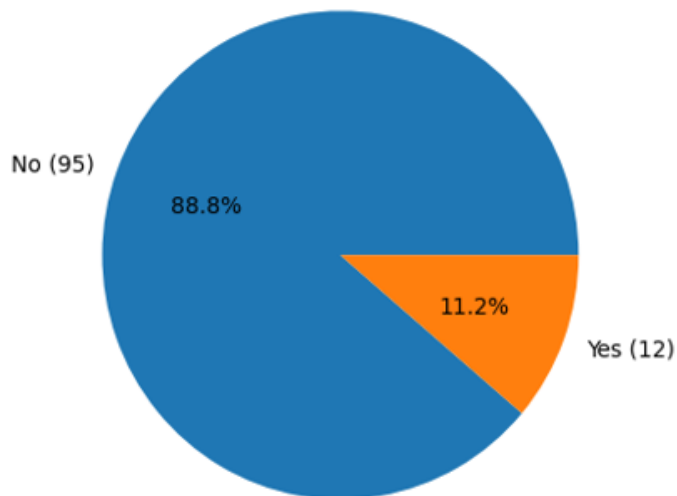
Total Responses: 109; Countries Represented: 16 African countries (Nigeria, Botswana, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Kenya, South Africa, Ghana, Egypt, Lesotho, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Eswatini, Cameroon and South Sudan).

One third of respondents, 33.3%, report that their institutions use RDA. Two-thirds do not.

RDA Usage Among Respondents (Total N=109)



RDA Toolkit Subscription Access (Total N=109)

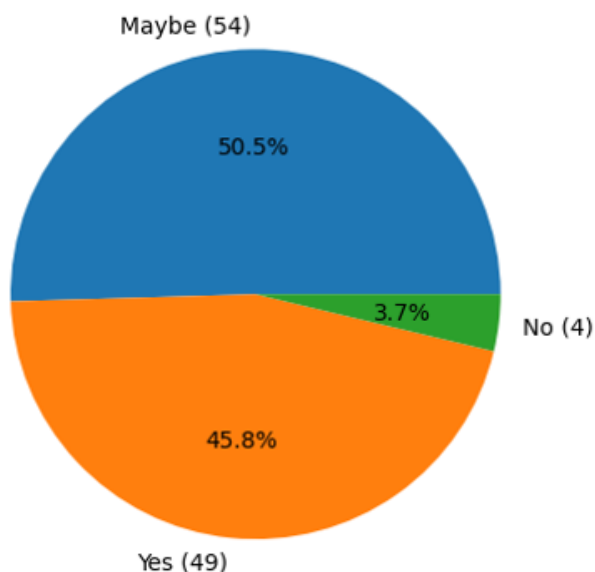


Only 11.2% report subscription access to the Official RDA Toolkit.

The cross-tabulation is particularly revealing. Of the 36 institutions reporting RDA use, 27 do not have Toolkit access. Approximately 75% of self-identified RDA users therefore operate without subscription access. This suggests hybrid implementation, partial adoption, reliance on legacy documentation or copy cataloguing rather than systematic policy realignment.

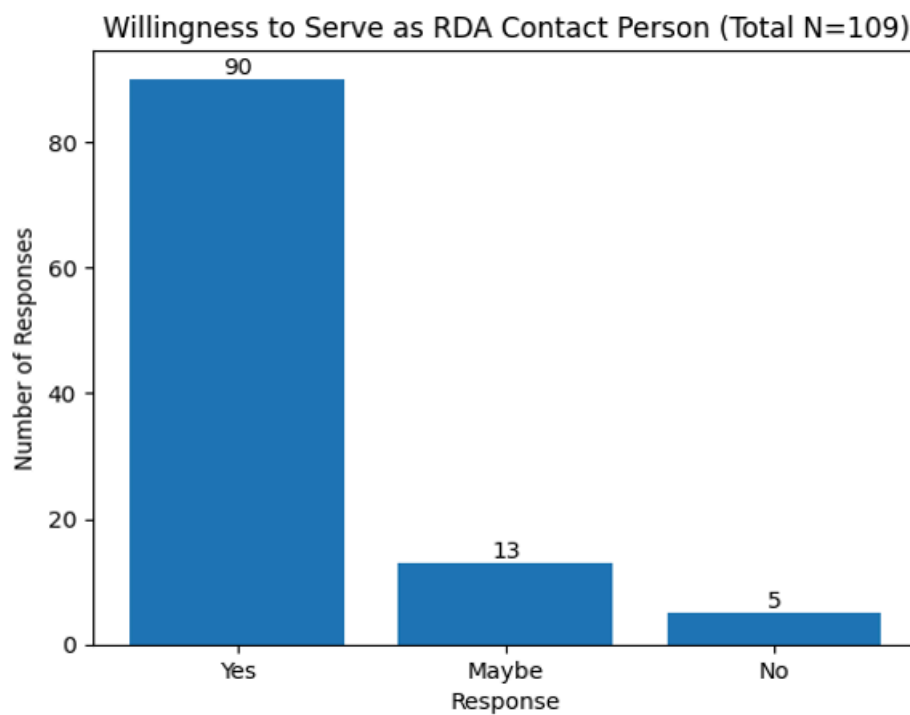
On the other hand, the pie chart below shows respondents' plans regarding subscription to the Official RDA Toolkit (N = 109):

Plans to Subscribe to Official RDA Toolkit (N = 109)



Almost half of the respondents indicate definite plans to subscribe, and just over half are considering it. Only a very small proportion explicitly reject subscription. This suggests that although current Toolkit access is low (11.2%), there is strong demand. Financial and structural constraints, rather than lack of interest, appear to be the main limiting factors.

In contrast, 82.6% of respondents indicate willingness to serve as contact persons or organisers for RDA engagement in their country or region. Professional motivation is high even where infrastructure is weak.



The pattern is therefore clear: moderate adoption, extremely low infrastructure and very high readiness.

#### 4. RDA adoption as a socio-technical process

The literature supports this structural reading. Aboyade and Eluwole (2018) describe Nigerian cataloguers who are enthusiastic yet constrained by funding instability and ICT deficiencies. Nwachi, Ihekwaaba and Nwafor (2021) identify hybrid AACR2 and RDA workflows shaped by system limitations. Madukoma, Unegbu and Olorunkalu (2023) show that readiness often remains attitudinal rather than operational. Udoh (2025) documents extensive training needs but persistent delays due to cost and access constraints.

These findings confirm that RDA implementation depends on an ecosystem of infrastructure, management support, technical competence and sustained documentation access. Awareness alone does not generate transformation.

The survey statistics reinforce this point. Adoption at 33.3% suggests emerging diffusion, yet Toolkit access at 11.2% exposes structural fragility. Where access is absent, implementation cannot consolidate.

The limiting variable is not motivation. It is infrastructure.

## **5. Recommendations**

The survey findings, field observations and published literature point to a coherent set of strategic recommendations. The evidence demonstrates that limited RDA adoption in Africa reflects structural constraints rather than professional reluctance. With 33.3% of respondents reporting RDA use, only 11.2% reporting Toolkit access and 82.6% expressing willingness to coordinate engagement, the central challenge is enabling capacity. The following integrated recommendations are proposed to address training, access, governance inclusion and long-term sustainability in a coordinated manner

### **5.1. Establish structured, modular and scalable training pathways**

Informed by discussions with the RSC Education and Orientation Officer, training should be treated as the primary scalable mechanism for RDA adoption. Empirical evidence indicates a strong correlation between structured training and implementation readiness ([Udoh, 2025](#); [Xaba and Shongwe, 2025](#)). However, isolated workshops or introductory sessions are insufficient. Training programmes should be modular, iterative and practice-oriented, enabling progression from foundational metadata principles to applied competence in RDA entities, elements and recording methods.

A structured pathway should advance from conceptual understanding of RDA and the IFLA LRM to practical skills, including MARC21 mapping, authority control, relationship designators, Toolkit navigation and institutional implementation planning. Such progression must be scaffolded to support sustained skills development rather than one-off learning interventions.

Crucially, training must be integrated with continuous access to the Official RDA Toolkit. Without sustained access, knowledge consolidation and implementation remain limited. Training provision and Toolkit access should therefore be treated as mutually dependent components of a unified adoption strategy.

### **5.2. Implement a regional train-the-trainer model**

Given the geographical scale of Africa and the strong willingness for coordinated engagement, a train-the-trainer model represents the most sustainable long-term approach. The RSC Education and Orientation Officer should lead the development of a structured programme that prepares regional trainers through advanced and

---

mentored instruction. Trainers should be selected from LIS educators, national libraries and professional associations to ensure institutional stability and continuity. As a strategic priority for RDA adoption, this initiative could be supported by the RDA Board, the RSC and relevant working groups.

Regional cohorts may be established from the 91 survey respondents who expressed willingness to serve as national or regional contact points. Grouping participants into West, East, Horn, Southern, and North African clusters would enable peer learning, regular online clinics and collaborative implementation pilots. Such structures would promote local ownership of RDA adoption while reducing reliance on external interventions.

### **5.3. Reform and expand RDA Toolkit access models**

RDA Toolkit access remains the most decisive structural bottleneck. Without subscription access, institutions rely on outdated documentation and fragmented knowledge transfer. With the retirement of the Original Toolkit in 2027, exclusion risks intensify.

Engagement with the RDA Toolkit Director and the RDA Board is therefore essential to explore viable and context-sensitive access models. These may include national or regional consortium licensing, association-based subscriptions, tiered pricing structures for low-resource contexts, sponsored seats for LIS schools and time-limited licences linked to structured training programmes. Access reform should be aligned with training initiatives to ensure sustainable uptake rather than temporary exposure.

### **5.4. Strengthening governance participation and representation of African librarians**

RDA governance remains largely concentrated in the Global North despite the linguistic and cultural diversity of African cataloguing contexts ([Ahonsi, 2014](#)). Survey results demonstrate strong professional willingness to engage, creating opportunities for increased African participation in RSC working groups, translation activities and technical committees. Regional cohort feedback mechanisms should inform RSC deliberations, while WCEO engagement can support progression towards sustained representation in governance structures.

Sustainable adoption also requires institutional and managerial commitment. Library leaders should be supported with clear briefing materials linking RDA implementation to interoperability, research visibility, metadata quality and digital transformation goals. Incorporating RDA into institutional strategies is essential for securing staff training time, Toolkit access and migration planning.

Bridging the gap between LIS education and professional practice is equally important. Collaboration between LIS schools and libraries should promote practice-

based learning using real systems and current RDA documentation, embedding competence early in professional development.

The Wider Community Engagement Officer (WCEO) functions as a critical link between global governance and regional implementation. Through coordinated training, train-the-trainer models, sustainable Toolkit access, leadership engagement and expanded governance participation supported by the RDA Board and RSC, professional readiness can be translated into lasting structural inclusion.

Evidence indicates that limited access, rather than lack of interest, constrains adoption. With the retirement of the Original Toolkit approaching, coordinated action across training, access, governance inclusion and institutional alignment is necessary to enable African and Asian professionals to move from peripheral adopters to active contributors in shaping RDA. Global standards ultimately depend on inclusive participation supported by sustained investment, local engagement and collaborative governance.

## References

- Aboyade, W. A. and Eluwole, O. A. (2018) 'Implementation of Resource Description and Access (RDA) in Nigeria: Awareness, cataloguers' perception and challenges', *Journal of Applied Information Science and Technology*, 11(2), pp. 79–86. Available at: <https://www.jaistonline.org/11vol2/9.pdf> [Accessed: 18 June 2026]
- Ahonsi, A. (2014) *Resource Description and Access (RDA) handbook for facilitating the understanding of RDA rules by librarians and cataloguers in English-speaking countries in sub-Saharan Africa*. Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/50025> [Accessed: 18 June 2026]
- ALA Digital Reference (2019-) *RDA Toolkit*. Available at: <https://access.rdatoolkit.org> [Accessed: 18 June 2026]
- Bamidele, I. A., Madukoma, E. and Onoyeyan, G. (2020) 'Awareness of Resource Description and Access (RDA) among cataloguers in Nigeria', *Jewel Journal of Librarianship*, 15(2), pp. 1–11. Available at: [https://www.jeweljournals.com/article\\_details\\_retrieval.php?article\\_id=00011905](https://www.jeweljournals.com/article_details_retrieval.php?article_id=00011905) [Accessed: 18 June 2026]
- Ezema, A. L., Ekenna, U. C. and Ogbuabor, D. C. (2022) 'Resource Description and Access (RDA): Cataloguing Standard for the Digital Era', *Nasarawa Journal of Library and Information Science (NAJLIS)*, 6(1).
- Kenya Library Association (2024) *RDA–KLA resource enhancement: A collaborative initiative proposal*. Unpublished concept note.
- Madukoma, E., Unegbu, V. E. and Olorunkalu, O. A. (2023) 'Librarians' readiness and implementation of Resource Description and Access (RDA) in academic libraries in South-West, Nigeria', *Global Journal of Applied, Management and Social Sciences*, 25, pp. 94–107. Available at: <https://www.gojamss.net/journal/index.php/gojamss/article/view/870> [Accessed: 18 June 2026]
- Nwachi, C. B., Ihekwaaba, E. and Nwafor, M. C. (2021) 'Implementation of RDA in cataloguing and classification in the 21st century: Issues, challenges and prospects', *Library Philosophy*

- and Practice*, 5245. Available at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/libphilprac/5245/> [Accessed: 18 June 2026]
- Oguntayo, S. A. and Adeleke, A. A. (2016) 'Awareness, knowledge and implementation of RDA in academic libraries in Nigeria', *36th Annual Workshop of NLA/Cataloguing, Classification & Indexing Section*, University of Calabar (Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria) 24–28 October. Available at: <https://eprints.lmu.edu.ng/id/eprint/626> [Accessed: 18 June 2026]
- Olorunkalu, O. A., Madukoma, E. and Unegbu, V. E. (2023) 'Librarians' ICT competence and Resource Description and Access (RDA) in academic libraries in South-West, Nigeria', *International Journal of Library and Information Technology*, 4(1), pp. 81–93. Available at: <https://www.gojamss.net/index.php/IJLIT/article/view/871/857> [Accessed: 18 June 2026]
- Omoosejimi, A. F., Nweke, A. C. and Omoadoni, O. R. (2022) 'Cataloguers' awareness, ICT skills and use of Resource Description and Access (RDA) in university libraries in South-South, Nigeria', *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 7397. Available at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/libphilprac/7397/> [Accessed: 18 June 2026]
- Oyelude, A. A. (2016) 'Conversion of catalogue records from AACR2 to RDA format: What, how and when?' *Compendium of papers presented at the 36th annual seminar/workshop of the Nigerian Library Association, Cataloguing, Classification and Indexing Section*, University of Calabar (Cross River State), 23-29 October. Nigerian Library Association, pp. 58–62. Available at: <http://ir.library.ui.edu.ng/handle/123456789/8385> and <http://ir.library.ui.edu.ng/handle/123456789/8387> [Accessed: 18 June 2026]
- Saliu, S. A. (2021) 'Awareness and use of Resource Description and Access (RDA) among librarians in Nigerian libraries', *Library Progress (International)*, 41(1), pp. 120–129.
- Udoh, I. U. (2025) 'Training and skill requirements of librarians for implementing Resource Description and Access (RDA) in public university libraries in South-East Nigeria', *Informology*, 4(1), pp. 79–106. Available at: <http://eprints.rclis.org/47074/> [Accessed: 18 June 2026]
- Xaba, S. G. and Shongwe, M. (2025) 'Implementation of Resource Description and Access in the Gauteng Province, South Africa', *South African Journal of Libraries and Information Science*, 91(2).
- Yeboah, E. B., Onyancha, O. B. and Mhlongo, M. A. (2023) 'Readiness of Ghanaian University Libraries towards the adoption and implementation of Resource Description and Access', *African Journal of Library, Archives and Information Science*, 33(2). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4314/ajlais.v33i2.3>