RESILIENCY IN NORTHERN GHANA (RING)
Activity Brief

Orange Flesheed Sweet Potato:
From Leaf to Root, it’s all Food
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Resiliency in Northern Ghana (RING) Project
**Background**

Northern Ghana has a hot and dry climate and food is often scarce. Since 2014, USAID’s Resiliency in Northern Ghana (RING) project has provided support to 17 Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assemblies (MMDAs) to address this challenge. RING is an integrated Feed the Future program, blending governance, agriculture, livelihoods, nutrition, and WASH interventions targeted towards Northern Ghana’s most vulnerable populations.

One agricultural activity that has been particularly successful is the introduction of Orange Fleshted Sweet Potato (OFSP). OFSP is not native to Northern Ghana. However, it is highly nutritious, climate-smart, and female-friendly and therefore a critical food security crop. In the first three years, RING has successfully introduced cultivation and storage techniques, preparation methods and recipes, and managed planting materials for the next season to over 13,000 smallholder households across the project area.

**Activity Summary**

**Scale:** The OFSP activity, like all RING activities, is overlaid upon the Village Savings and Loan (VSLA) platform (meaning every activity is introduced to the VSLA group as the main access and training point). The number of beneficiaries engaged in the OFSP activity is expected to reach 100% coverage by the end of the project in 2019 from 17% in 2017—approximately 75,000 households.

**Cultivation:** RING provides OFSP vines (planting material) to each VSLA and provides training on how to prepare the land (ridging), planting, field care, land maintenance, harvesting, and storage. Each VSLA is provided with 7,000 vines to cultivate communally on a ½ acre plot, and splitting the yield evenly¹. VSLA members are also trained to preserve some vines to plant the next season, which requires access to water for about 7-8 months.

**Utilization:** Harvesting, typically happens in early October, after which RING provides utilization training, focusing on the nutritional content and how

¹ Some VSLA groups sub-divide the land and each take their portion of the harvest.
to incorporate both the roots and leaves into traditional meals suitable for the entire household, with a particular emphasis on children under five. Various RING partners contribute to these utilization trainings to ensure a comprehensive effort. The district Women in Agricultural Development (WIAD) team trains the mothers on incorporating new foods into traditional meals. The district Environmental Health team trains on appropriate hygiene practices. The Ghana Health Service nutrition team focuses on nutritional benefits.

**Vine Multiplication & Distribution:** Since OFSP is not native to the Northern Region, vines were not readily available on the market upon activity inception. RING sub-contracted the University of Development Studies (UDS) in Tamale to rapidly multiply vines throughout the region, and initial planting material had to be purchased from private suppliers in the Volta region. UDS now has 20 Decentralized Vine Multiplication (DVMs) sites (a total of 29.5 acres, and average 1.9 acres each) throughout the Northern region that are managed by small groups of local people trained to properly cultivate vines. They are in the process of growing vines for distribution that will begin in May/June 2018 just before the planting (rainy) season. In addition, each District is setting up their own DVM sites (average ½ acre) to multiply vines for distribution this year as well. These sites must be established near a consistent water source.

The goal for 2018 is to generate 23 million vines for distribution to all 3,000 VSLA groups. A one-acre site, if managed properly, can generate 600,000 vines in a season. Beyond the DVM site training conducted by UDS, RING has provided material support to establish these sites - fencing and other equipment like irrigation tubes and pumps. In addition, each OFSP beneficiary has been trained to preserve their vines from the end of the harvest (November) through planting of the following year (May/June). This requires a consistent source of water, and protection of vines from animals and children. RING recommended that they plant their vines in their dry season gardens (which is another RING intervention) or behind / near bathing or washing areas, which retain moisture. Despite training, many beneficiaries have had a difficult time preserving their vines and many were unable to because they did not have a suitable and consistent source of water. Some beneficiaries have used the root multiplication method to preserve vines which allows sprouting from a small sized root until sprouts turn into vines and are transplanted. For the few who have been successful in preserving vines, they are able to use them throughout the dry season as another leafy green vegetable to consume or to sell for cash which is used to buy food once grains have been depleted.

**Adoption & Acceptability:** OFSP has been incredibly popular among the beneficiary communities who have cultivated and prepared it. Mothers have found that both roots and leaves fit well within their traditional diet, and are able to use them as a substitute or a complement to other foods. Children love it, and many eat roots raw like apples. Some notable observations about it, is that children are able to take the boiled roots to school for lunch and therefore do not need to bring lunch money and because of its natural sweetness, no additional sugar needs to be added to porridges.
So far, yields from RING-supported plots have not lasted very long, anecdotal evidence shows that most households seemed to have consumed their entire crop in under a month, sharing it among large households and other family members. Many beneficiaries want to grow more, but lack the expertise and access to more vines.

**Sustainability:** Currently the focus of the intervention is on household consumption to improve nutritional status particularly of women and children at the household. With a strong focus of building demand, the groundwork has been laid for a more market-oriented intervention. Future efforts will be able to build on this to develop or stimulate a market for OFSP products (raw, processed, vines, roots, etc.) Prior to RING, many people in the target areas had never seen or eaten OFSP. Now many have been familiarized with it and would like to have more of it.

**Opportunities for Future Programming:** For households to continue to cultivate and consume OFSP beyond RING, households need to have a consistent and reliable supply of vines each year for planting. This should be the role of the market. There is a considerable opportunity to convert existing RING-supported DVMs (both UDS and District) to business endeavors now that there is considerable demand for the product. It is clear there is a real opportunity to expand, stimulate, and grow the OFSP value chain in Northern Ghana.

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