PHOTO: HADJARA LAOUALI BALLA/MOMENTUM INTEGRATED HEALTH RESILIENCE NIGER

Learning Brief

ACCELERATING ADAPTIVE LEARNING
Resources, Tools, and Insights from MOMENTUM

Adaptive learning is critical for complex development projects to adjust to the environments in which they operate. Increasingly, projects are turning to strategies like adaptive management, complexity-aware monitoring, and quality improvement methodologies to improve their use of knowledge and data to drive needed adaptations. However, these strategies often encounter resistance or are not implemented due to knowledge and skill gaps or the lack of an enabling environment to support change. Strengthening systems and building capacity for adaptive learning addresses these issues, helping build individual and team knowledge and skills to effectively incorporate these approaches for learning and improvement.

The USAID MOMENTUM awards aim to address the health needs of hard-to-reach populations, including those in conflict and fragile settings. The awards collaborate with partners, such as governments and multilateral organizations, to improve care that may face cultural and social barriers, including family planning and vaccines. MOMENTUM emphasizes adaptive learning as key to improving access to maternal, newborn, and child health and

nutrition, voluntary family planning, and reproductive health (MNCHN/FP/RH) information and services, and the MOMENTUM theory of change integrates adapting to evidence into the core of its structure. Many adaptive learning approaches, particularly complexity-aware monitoring methods, are well suited for use in technically and socially complex settings, making them a good fit for the awards. Each MOMENTUM award has created tools and protocols for routine application of adaptive learning across the MOMENTUM awards and beyond.

This brief, a MOMENTUM learning agenda product (see Box 1), explores adaptive learning efforts within the MOMENTUM awards. It aims to take a closer look at adaptive learning practices and knowledge gained in the first few years of project implementation, to share high-level learnings to improve future work. This brief synthesizes qualitative information (e.g., process documentation, studies, and reports) and materials and recordings from MOMENTUM events to highlight relevant tools and takeaways. It also shares case studies from across the awards to demonstrate how adaptive learning has strengthened MOMENTUM programming across settings. It is meant to be used by MOMENTUM award teams, implementing partners, and other projects seeking examples and tools to support their adaptive learning practices.

> **Box 1: MOMENTUM Learning Agenda**
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> MOMENTUM's learning agenda complements award-specific learning agendas and is intended for use by the MOMENTUM awards to collaborate, learn, and adapt. Its objectives include capturing relevant, prioritized learning; contributing to filling critical knowledge gaps for MOMENTUM, USAID, and country and global stakeholders; and telling MOMENTUM's story.
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> **Learning Area Addressed:** How is Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) being used to achieve successes through MOMENTUM?
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> **Learning Topic Addressed:** How is MOMENTUM improving adaptive learning in MNCHN/FP/RH?

DEFINING ADAPTIVE LEARNING

Adaptive learning is not new, yet one clear, consensus definition of the term does not exist in the development literature. Concepts such as iteration, feedback, course correction, and complexity awareness all have important ties to adaptive learning and are useful approaches for implementing collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) practices. More systematic approaches to understanding adaptations and creating generalizable knowledge include implementation research and rigorous program evaluation. Over the last 20 years, USAID's strategic response to the need for projects to learn and adapt became codified in the CLA framework. CLA merges tools, approaches, and critical programming components that work to promote effective programs.

Why do we need adaptive learning?

We work in changing environments. We need to understand and adapt to those changes.

Unexpected events will occur. Sometimes we need to pivot in response to unplanned events.

Our assumptions aren't always correct. Despite careful planning, sometimes plans still need to be changed.

Source: Adapted from the MOMENTUM Knowledge Accelerator and MOMENTUM Country and Global Health Blended Learning Training Package in Adaptive Learning

The following definitions guide this resource:

- **Adaptive learning** is the intentional adoption of strategies and actions to facilitate critical reflection and analysis of data, information, and knowledge—on a continuous basis and from a wide range of sources—to inform decisions that optimize program implementation and effectiveness in expected, unexpected, and changing circumstances (Ross, 2021). In other words, adaptive learning means seeking out and using information to help teams better understand the context in which they are working, ongoing changes to that context, how that context interacts

with or affects project implementation, and how to respond to changes effectively with programmatic adjustments.

- **Adaptive management** is an intentional approach to making decisions and adjustments in response to new information and changes in context (USAID, 2018).

The terms adaptive learning and adaptive management are often used interchangeably in the literature, which may lead to confusion. For our purposes, adaptive management pertains to the practice of integrating adaptive learning into the management processes of a project or program, while adaptive learning supports adaptive management as well as other continuous improvement methods.

KEY INSIGHTS

To date, the MOMENTUM awards have developed a wide range of tools, resources, and events to strengthen the capacity of staff and the global community to integrate adaptive learning into their projects (see Appendix A and Box 2). Here, we examine whether—and how—the awards have practiced adaptive learning since MOMENTUM's inception in 2020 and what they have learned from their experience.
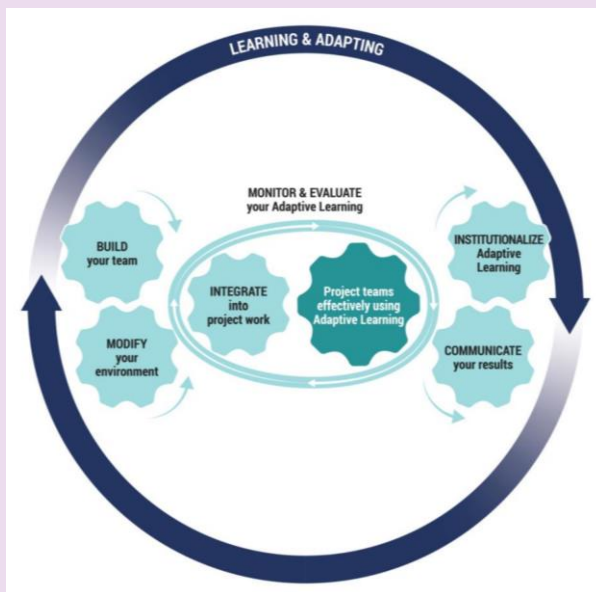
Structural Integration

MOMENTUM implementers have noted the critical value of building adaptive learning practices into the frameworks that establish project structures and goals, including **theories of change** and project reports. For example, MOMENTUM Country and Global Leadership noted that adopting a more implementation-focused theory of change helped them focus on critical project implementation processes and prioritize adaptation and learning to achieve project success.

Adaptive learning also must be built into **work plans**, where opportunities for collecting and using evidence to inform and refine approaches can be integrated into timelines and metrics that make award achievements more measurable. A MOMENTUM Country and Global Leadership activity in Ghana took this approach by training Ministry of Health staff at the regional, district, and facility levels in adaptive learning strategies and practices, building their capacity to run responsive and evidence-based programs. Institutional and facility-level teams were strengthened, and this learning enhanced program implementation.

Box 2. Six Processes to Enable Teams to Integrate Adaptive Learning into their Projects

The MOMENTUM Adaptive Learning Guide notes six processes that enable teams to integrate adaptive learning into projects, including building a team, modifying the environment, institutionalizing adaptive learning, and communicating results, with these four actions allowing for integration of adaptive learning into project work and use of adaptive learning by teams. Notably, these processes touch each stage in a project's life cycle, from planning and launch to full-scale implementation and adjustment.

Source: Ross, J., Karlage, A., Etheridge, J., Alade, M., Fifield, J., Goodwin, C., Semrau, K., and Hirschhorn, L. (2021). *Adaptive Learning Guide: A Pathway to Stronger Collaboration, Learning, and Adapting.* Washington, DC: USAID MOMENTUM.

The need for structural integration applies at both the core[*] and country levels. **Partnership agreements, memoranda of understanding, and joint monitoring plans** should explicitly integrate and prioritize adaptive learning to communicate its value from the inception of a project and to initiate conversations about how adaptive learning will be practiced within each unique relationship and context.

MOMENTUM Routine Immunization Transformation and Equity has developed country-specific approaches to adaptive learning for their uniquely expansive work, which involves collaboration with multilateral global organizations as well as subnational ones. For example, in India, the award has created an infographic illustrating its adaptive learning cycle, including specific guidance for cultural integration, data sharing, and institutionalizing practices across teams. The award also articulates the ways in which adaptive learning is integrated with—but distinct from—monitoring, evaluation, and learning approaches, emphasizing communication and reflection around implementation changes.

> **Point of View: Flexibility is key to successfully implement adaptive learning**
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> How do we move from implementation to management of learning? During a Monitoring, Evaluation, Innovation, and Learning Working Group webinar, Chioma Oduenyi, director of the MOMENTUM Country and Global Leadership Nigeria project, noted that it's all about the ability to quickly adapt to new information. "…Because we are intentional about it and flexible, when we discover new things through the AML [adaptive management and learning] approaches, we're able to program and use it," Oduenyi said. She added that **people will not be motivated to continue adaptive learning in beyond its early stages if changes are never implemented, due to the rigidity of work plans, timelines, or other processes.**
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> "It will be a win-win for everyone," Oduenyi said, if implementers, monitors, and program staff consistently see the value in what they're doing.

Practical Integration

Once frameworks are developed, activities are built into work plans, and program staff across teams understand the rationale, teams must be given the **knowledge, tools, and training** to put adaptive learning into practice.

Staff must understand how adaptive learning fits into programming and how data and evidence contribute to program improvement. To this end, monitoring activities must be purposeful and integrated within the project. Additionally, staff must have the practical skills and the financial resources to gather and analyze the relevant data.

From October 2021 to February 2022, MOMENTUM Integrated Health Resilience, in cooperation with the Measurement, Adaptive Learning, and Knowledge Management Lab (MAKLab[†]), organized a training-of-trainers focused on the adaptive learning life cycle for MOMENTUM headquarters staff. From the core team of trainees, champions were identified to create capacity strengthening resources for in-country workshops. Multiple country-level workshops have been conducted using those resources, and facilitators for additional workshops are being

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[*] "Core" teams refer to those on the MOMENTUM global project whereas "country teams" refer to teams on each of the MOMENTUM country projects supported by USAID Missions.

[†] MAKLab is operated by MOMENTUM Knowledge Accelerator, in partnership with the other MOMENTUM awards, to help identify and spread promising solutions to persistent, shared, and complex challenges to increase and sustain access to high-quality, equitable health services.

identified and trained, supporting more projects and partners to adopt adaptive learning practices. As part of its workshops, the award identified a focal point for adaptive learning in each country and followed up with focal points for several months after each training.

MOMENTUM Private Healthcare Delivery has found tools and templates such as Data to Action Frameworks (D2Af), organizational capacity assessment (OCA) action plans, and after-action reviews to be useful in guiding performance assessments and reflective practices that inform adaptive learning. Beyond simply providing these tools to program staff, they train them on the materials so that practices are built into work plans from inception.

MOMENTUM Country and Global Leadership has embedded a monitoring, evaluation, and learning advisor into each of its core technical and country teams. These advisors have a mandate to reinforce the importance of adaptive learning to staff and leadership at all levels, provide support for practices, and hold staff accountable for integrating practices. Global core monitoring, evaluation, and learning advisers have also conducted regional workshops in Africa and Asia focused on the adaptive learning cycle and have found opportunities to share practices at conferences and MOMENTUM events. Across this experience, the award has found that two to three day, in-person workshops are the most effective for teaching adaptive learning principles and practices.

Cultural Integration

For adaptive learning to take root within a project, **leadership at both the core and country levels must believe in its value**. Staff at all levels must be oriented to adaptive learning, its aims, and its significant to their work.

One of MOMENTUM Integrated Health Resilience's key approaches to integrating adaptive learning is practicing it at the core level by conducting data review meetings, annual pause and reflect sessions, and ad-hoc after-action reviews. Through such practices, the core team also provides a model for county-level teams to implement adaptive learning into their work. In country portfolio reviews led by the core team, adaptation is a consistent agenda item.

Several awards have noted the importance of a pause-and-reflect practice: MOMENTUM Private Healthcare Delivery has chosen to build flexibility and reflection into its annual work planning process, during which aggregate lessons from previous years inform new learning questions, activities, and data review practices.

Building adaptive learning into MOMENTUM country projects is critical, as much of the data gathering that informs adaptive learning happens locally in facilities and communities. Local partners must be adequately invested to perform the critical groundwork of evidence collection.

Under MOMENTUM Country and Global Leadership, country buy-ins developed their own theories of change that underscored collaborative implementation, with less focus on a detailed technical approach. Each theory of change relates to the MOMENTUM award's overall theory but includes context-specific nuance and reflects the choices of country-level implementors and the perspectives of local partners, fostering ownership and accountability. This structural integration lays a solid foundation for adaptive learning during implementation and encourages participation across project teams.

Under MOMENTUM Routine Immunization Transformation and Equity, cohesiveness and collaboration are articulated practices in the evaluate, act, and adapt learning cycle. Methods include co-creation and participatory approaches in program design; engaging communities, project staff, and other collaborators in data review meetings, learning exchanges, and other fora where teams across levels can engage with the data. To cultivate a supportive culture across programs, the project has also initiated annual events such as an internal CLA Case Competition, which invites implementers and partners across their country projects to share examples of how adaptive learning has been employed during program implementation (described in more detail below).

MOMENTUM ADAPTIVE LEARNING IN ACTION

The following case studies demonstrate approaches by the MOMENTUM awards to integrating adaptive learning into project design and implementation and capturing the effects on processes and outcomes.

MOMENTUM Integrated Health Resilience
Data monitoring streamlines programs and improves services in Tanzania

In Tanzania, MOMENTUM Integrated Health Resilience focuses on population, health, environment (PHE) interventions, with a strong family planning (FP) component. The team uses several mechanisms for monitoring the effectiveness of their work, including regular data review and program performance meetings and dashboards that show comparative data for FP service delivery, outreach, and support for facilities and health workers. During a routine progress meeting in mid-2022, the team reviewed client and financial data and found that although existing FP events attracted many clients, they were costly and offered only short-term FP options to clients.

In response, starting in October 2022 the team started organizing monthly events at remote local facilities during which visiting specialists from higher-level facilities offer long-acting and permanent FP methods to clients. The pivot brought an expanded range of care options to new and returning clients.

The new approach resolved both issues identified through the initial data review, reducing overall costs while expanding the range of services. Now, nearly 20% of all FP clients across the 12 supported facilities visit during the monthly event, and facilities have reported increased uptake of long-acting FP methods on those days compared with routine service days. Regular and comparative data review, cost-benefit analysis, and dynamic consideration of quality of care helped the program adapt to its context and achieve better outcomes for clients.

MOMENTUM Country and Global Leadership
Mitigating gender-based violence and child, early, and forced marriage through institutional investments in Nigeria

In Nigeria's Ebonyi and Sokoto states, MOMENTUM Country and Global Leadership worked to prevent and mitigate the consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), address the drivers of child early and forced marriage (CEFM), and promote early adoption of family planning (FP). The project worked to build the capacity of local institutions, organizations, and providers to deliver evidence-based, high-quality information and services.

MOMENTUM Country and Global Leadership co-created evidence-based interventions with stakeholders and conducted assessments and GBV services mapping in the two states. They integrated adaptive learning from the start through monitoring and pause-and-reflect practices, after-action reviews, and data review meetings. These practices helped identify areas for improvement, including low GBV screening rates linked to inadequate facility-level staffing, and to develop solutions, including onsite mentoring of volunteers to support screening, increased monitoring of documentation of care provided, and better integration of Ministry of Health staff in Ebonyi and Sokoto states. Screening rates improved over time, and knowledge management and data review are becoming more institutionalized, increasing the likelihood that future gaps will be identified and addressed.

MOMENTUM Private Healthcare Delivery
Leveraging partnerships to strengthen capacity for adaptive learning

[MOMENTUM Private Healthcare Delivery partnered with the Uganda Private Midwives Association](#) (UPMA) to support clinical and organizational capacity strengthening to improve the uptake of family planning, including postpartum family planning, in three urban districts of Kampala. By using organizational capacity assessments in the early stages of implementation, the project found that learning and knowledge management were gaps for UPMA.

After conducting clinical trainings with UPMA, MOMENTUM Private Healthcare Delivery implemented an after-action review to better understand the effectiveness of their trainings and to inform future adaptations. As UPMA continued to train providers, they adapted and adopted this method to reflect on and learn from their work. UPMA soon began conducting after-action reviews and using a learning tracker to document key insights and accomplishments, relevant adaptations for implementation, results, challenges, and next steps and share learning with their members across the country.

This was the first time UPMA had used this kind of reflection tool, and it served to improve knowledge management and promote adaptive learning within their training processes, thus improving the effectiveness of their training and adding a vital on-the-job mentorship component. With a better understanding of the value of documentation and reflection, UPMA continues to use after-action reviews as part of a long-term capacity to institutionalize adaptive learning.

MOMENTUM Safe Surgery in Family Planning and Obstetrics

Quality Improvement Approaches for Safe Surgery in Nigeria

In [Nigeria,](#) MOMENTUM Safe Surgery in Family Planning and Obstetrics sought to accelerate reductions in maternal and newborn mortality and morbidity by increasing the capacity of Nigerian institutions and local organizations to introduce, deliver, scale-up, and sustain the use of safe and appropriate surgical obstetric care. The project worked with partners to strengthen and institutionalize key quality improvement approaches, including scale-up of [Robson classification](#), to address the overuse of cesarean delivery.

The project took several steps to support use of the Robson classification system. First, they delivered training-of-trainers and stepdown training to strengthen health care workers' capacity to use the method. The project utilized supportive supervision, coaching, and mentoring to routinize the practice. During these visits, facilities engaged labor and delivery staff in monthly pause-and-reflect style meetings to analyze cesarean delivery data using the Robson Classification.

The implementation of the pause-and-reflect approaches helped healthcare providers understand the reasons behind cesarean deliveries, compare rates, and identify areas where interventions might be needed to reduce unnecessary cesarean sections. Providers' correct use of the Robson classification contributed to a decline in overall cesarean rates and informed programmatic decision-making.

MOMENTUM Routine Immunization Transformation and Equity

Client flow improvements increase COVID-19 vaccination in Ethiopia

In February 2023, MOMENTUM Routine Immunization Transformation and Equity hosted an adaptive learning case competition across their country projects that garnered 50 entries from implementers and partners. The competition helped shine a light on adaptive learning in practice and incentivized broader use of adaptive learning approaches. One winning case came from Ethiopia, where a barrier to client vaccine uptake was detected and resolved with the help of adaptive learning.

In Addis Ababa in late 2022, a national measles vaccination campaign for children was integrated with other services including routine immunization, deworming, screening for malnutrition, and identification of common ailments. Importantly, the MOMENTUM team hoped to reach the caregivers of children with COVID-19 information and vaccination.

As the campaign rolled out at temporary access points across communities, one sub-city within Addis was significantly underperforming in its COVID-19 vaccination targets. During MOMENTUM-led supportive supervision with the teams running community access points, a gap in client flow was detected that resulted in many caregivers leaving the service site without hearing about the COVID-19 vaccine. Rewriting the client flow to close this gap more than doubled average daily COVID-19 vaccinations at the site, from 351 to 841.

This change was made during the first few days of the campaign, which led to more successful continued rollout of services and more people protected against COVID-19. The adaptation was then scaled across all service sites, expanding the learning model and increasing the chances of the campaign's overall success. That early detection was possible only because of daily data collection and analysis and supportive supervision practices that structured solutions-oriented conversations among care worker teams and supervisors. MOMENTUM's experience in Ethiopia shows that strong monitoring frameworks need to be proactively designed and consistently implemented to reap the full benefits of adaptive learning.

SUMMARY AND A WAY FORWARD

The systematic and intentional use of evidence to inform project adaptation and growth is one of the primary long-term outcomes of the MOMENTUM project, and one that has the potential to last far beyond the lifespan of the project. In dynamic contexts like health systems, where responsiveness to changing environments is crucial, adaptive learning is key to sustaining and increasing positive outcomes across a spectrum of needs.

In MOMENTUM, structural approaches have been essential in embedding adaptive learning into existing data collection, analysis, and communication processes from the outset. Rather than initiating new, the projects have prioritized building in time and strengthening capacities for reflection and evidence use. This structural, practical, and cultural integration has been instrumental in achieving more responsive and effective programming. Adaptive learning is not an additional programming component, but rather a fundamental aspect of project design and implementation. The MOMENTUM approach has helped ensure necessary space for project adaptations, allowing for more responsive and effective program implementation.

While systematic strategies have been effective, MOMENTUM awards have suggested a few areas where further refinement and innovation can strengthen the overall effectiveness of adaptive learning:

- **Identifying key personnel**: Who within an organization is best positioned to create and maintain structures that support adaptive learning?
- **Quantifying value:** How can the added value of adaptive learning in achieving outcomes be measured and communicated?
- **Institutionalization:** How can effective adaptive management practices be institutionalized in multiple levels of the health system?

MOMENTUM awards and partners will continue to explore such questions as they work to further strengthen their capacity and systems to institutionalize adaptive learning.

Suggested Citation

Ivankovich, Megan, Alana Barton, and Colby Reed. (2024). *Accelerating adaptive learning: Sharing resources, tools, and insights from MOMENTUM*. USAID MOMENTUM Knowledge Accelerator.

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Ross, J., Karlage, A., Etheridge, J., Alade, M., Fifield, J., Goodwin, C., Semrau, K., and Hirschhorn, L. (2021). *Adaptive learning guide: A pathway to stronger collaboration, learning, and adapting.* USAID MOMENTUM.

USAID. (2018). *Program cycle discussion note: Adaptive management*.

APPENDIX A. MOMENTUM TOOLS AND EVENTS RELATED TO ADAPTIVE LEARNING

Tools

RESOURCE	AUTHOR	YEAR	DESCRIPTION
Documenting Adaptive Learning Toolkit: Templates and Resources to Support Adaptive Learning	MAKLab	2024	Supports users to improve how they document adaptive learning and quality improvement activities.
An Internal Collaborating, Learning and Adapting Case Competition	MOMENTUM Routine Immunization Transformation and Equity	2023	Winning entry in USAID's CLA Case Competition.
Blended Learning Training Package in Adaptive Learning	MOMENTUM Knowledge Accelerator, MOMENTUM Country and Global Leadership	2022	Offers four training modules that present an overview of adaptive learning and how to integrate adaptive learning practices into project work, along with a facilitator's guide, in French and English.
Measuring and Monitoring Adaptive Learning: A Landscape Review	MOMENTUM Knowledge Accelerator	2022	Explores the measurement, monitoring, and evaluation of adaptive learning interventions.
Summative Program Evaluations: Operational Guidance and Technical Brief	MOMENTUM Country and Global Leadership	2022	Builds on Adaptive Learning Toolkit with additional guidance on conducting summative program evaluations.
Adaptive Learning Guide: A Pathway to Stronger Collaboration, Learning, and Adapting	MOMENTUM Knowledge Accelerator	2021	Provides information and resources to integrate adaptive learning into the design, implementation, and improvement of programs for MNCH/FP/RH services and care. Available in English and French.
Complexity-Aware Monitoring Approaches: An Overview	MOMENTUM Knowledge Accelerator	2021	Provides support to MOMENTUM partners using complexity-aware monitoring approaches to enhance their monitoring and evaluation and adaptive learning practices.
Adaptive Learning in Projects and Programs	MOMENTUM Country and Global Leadership	2021	Includes recommendations and tools for integrating adaptive learning practices into program design and implementation.
Effects of COVID-19 on Essential MNCHN/FP/RH Care and the Strategies and	MOMENTUM Knowledge Accelerator	2021	Summarizes strategies and adaptions used during the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain essential

			MNCHN/FP/RH services and the effects of these efforts.
Adaptations Emerging in Response: Rapid Evidence Summary			
A Guide to Complexity-Aware Monitoring Approaches for MOMENTUM Projects	MOMENTUM Knowledge Accelerator	2020	Provides guidance on the use of complexity-aware monitoring, including an introduction to key concepts and approaches.

Events

EVENT TITLE	LOCATION	DATE	DESCRIPTION	CONTRIBUTING AWARDS*
A Conversation About Adaptive Learning Across MOMENTUM: Approaches, Successes, and Challenges	Virtual	June 14, 2023	MOMENTUM ME/IL Working Group webinar	**MOMENTUM Knowledge Accelerator**, MOMENTUM Country and Global Leadership, MOMENTUM Integrated Health Resilience, MOMENTUM Private Healthcare Delivery, MOMENTUM Routine Immunization Transformation and Equity
Workshop: Incorporating Adaptive Management Strategies to Rapidly Improve Programming *(No event recording)*	Cape Town, South Africa	May 12, 2022	Side event on adaptive learning at the International Maternal Newborn Health Conference	MOMENTUM Country and Global Leadership
MOMENTUM Adaptive Learning Guide: Launch of the Guide and Examples of Adaptive Learning Across the Suite	Virtual	2021	The official launch of the Adaptive Learning Guide and project examples of adaptive learning in action.	**MOMENTUM Knowledge Accelerator**, MOMENTUM Country and Global Leadership, MOMENTUM Routine Immunization Transformation and Equity
MOMENTUM Complexity Aware Monitoring Workshop Series	Virtual	2021	A five-session series introducing participants to complexity-aware monitoring approaches and examples of use from within and beyond the MOMENTUM suite.	**MOMENTUM Knowledge Accelerator**, MOMENTUM Country and Global Leadership, MOMENTUM Routine Immunization Transformation and Equity, MOMENTUM Safe Surgery in Family Planning and Obstetrics

Bold indicates organizer of the event