

Through the interns' eyes: Witnessing Intersos' impact on migrant communities in Palermo

We are Jana, Pien and Antonia, three "Global Health" master students at the University of Maastricht in the Netherlands. In the period from May until August 2025 we are placed with Intersos Palermo to write our master thesis at the nexus of migration and health. However, this thesis is about way more than academic writing. We got the opportunity to frequently follow the Intersos team on their daily activities reaching out to marginalized migrant communities with the mobile clinic across the city.

What kind of impact do these activities have on the beneficiaries?

Let us highlight our experiences using the example of a homeless Ghanaian community living in a small informal settlement in a public square of Palermo. For the past year the interdisciplinary Intersos team has been going there once a week with the mobile clinic: the cultural mediator, the social worker, the nurse and the doctor. When we came along for the first time in May, we quickly noticed the trustful and warm atmosphere between the community and the Intersos team. The Ghanaian cultural mediator introduced us to the individual beneficiaries and helped with the communication in English and Twi. We listened to their stories and told them a bit about ourselves because they were curious to find out who these new girls with the lighter hair and skin tone were, as they did not appear to be Italian. Meanwhile the medical team was busy inside the mobile clinic conducting medical consultations. When we talked to our Intersos colleagues later that day we were really impressed by how well they know each individual person of the community. They all have their story of migration, their family, medical history and legal difficulties. We could truly see what Intersos' person-centered approach means in reality as the team tries to cover all the medical, social and legal needs of the people. When asking how Intersos was able to build such a strong relationship with the community we got answers like: "We try to bring consistency, always showing up on the same day, at the same time, taking their requests seriously, never turning them down" and "We try to not only provide medicine and water but honestly, just to meet them as people".

We saw the Intersos staff scan the medical documents of the beneficiaries with their tablet, after the beneficiary had given consent, to save them in the Intersos online platform, always following Intersos internal policies on data collection. This way the documents do not disappear in case the beneficiary's belongings get wet or stolen in the informal settlement.

In the following weeks we kept meeting individuals of the community as Intersos directly picked them up from the public square to take them to doctors' appointments at the primary health care services or in the cooperation hospital that Intersos has an agreement with. It is by constantly facilitating these little logistic steps that we can witness that linkage to public services is created, barriers are overcome, and continuity of medical care is ensured for everyone.

Then, it was the beginning of July and Palermo started to prepare for the festivities honoring the city's patron Santa Rosalia. It is an iconic, deeply rooted event - blending faith, history and tradition in an extraordinary celebration that gathers thousands of people every year. A few days prior to the

big parade, the police came to the public square, and the Ghanaian community was forcibly evicted without prior notice. The Intersos medical coordinator rushed to the site and could only witness the brutal action taking place under her eyes with no respect for human dignity. The explanation that was given to her by the authorities? To “clean up” the city in preparation for the Festino of Santa Rosalia. The members of the community sadly lost most of their few possessions and were left with no place to go due to their partly irregular legal status. The Intersos team, however, tried to at least provide some comfort by being present after the eviction and by supplying them with the most essential goods for the upcoming days.

We were deeply saddened to hear and see how the community was literally treated as “trash” that needed to be removed from the city. At the same time, we were also very touched by the human connection established between the Intersos team and the beneficiaries: that is what remained strong through that difficult moment. And it is this that makes us proud and inspired to be part of this team: work to protect and guarantee dignity in every situation, no matter what, leave no one behind and take a stand for equity and all the people that get denied their basic human rights.