



# Youness

MOROCCAN FOOTBALLER  
ADAPTING TO A NEW LIFE

At first, he thought that it was a rain just like so many others, but it had already lasted four days. That morning in February of 2009, Youness was chatting and playing cards with his friends in their usual meeting place, a ruined house on a hill at the entrance to his town. His town was a tiny valley with two dozen houses on the outskirts of Slimane, a city of 150,000 in the centre of Morocco. Not far from the capital Rabat, this is a region of gentle hills and mild temperatures suited to agriculture. Youness is not a farmer, but his father is. Twenty years ago, his parents came to this region from the south, near Marrakech, looking for a better place to raise crops and live. The south is hot and dry; on the plains of Gharb, near Sidi Slimane, the climate is milder and humid, and the soil more fertile. Here, they were able to buy two hectares of land and they began to grow bananas and strawberries.

Suddenly that morning, in the middle of their games, Youness and his friends heard something strange: shouting, sudden movements. So they walked out of the ruined house to see what was going on; they saw their neighbours shouting and running about because their houses were flooding. The houses were made from mud bricks; in the valley, the water already came up to people's waists, and everyone was struggling to salvage their mattresses, furniture and clothing. Youness and his friends ran down and started looking for buckets to help out.

By around three in the afternoon, things seemed under control: the houses that were most affected had been evacuated and the rain was slowing down. The neighbours were tired and annoyed, but a bit calmer. In the end, it wasn't any worse than things they had experienced before.

That night at dinner, Youness and his parents talked about what had happened that day. They talked about whether

Mohammed had lost his radio or Hanae been left without clothes for her baby. At least the rain had stopped, they said, and the water had not reached their house, which was on slightly higher ground. At around nine, Youness was watching television when a deluge began drumming on the roof. At eleven it was still raining just as hard, and Youness heard shouting and a sound that he had never heard before: a sort of tatatata. Later he would describe it similar to an enormous animal stampeding. Youness walked outside; in the darkness, he could perceive that the houses below were sinking. The river had overflowed and there was water everywhere. The shouts, in the middle of the night, were terrifying.

Youness went inside to fetch his parents and his brother. Just barely dressed and without taking anything with them, they left home and ran to the top of the hill. Shouting for help, others did the same. Everyone was frightened and soaking wet;

freezing, they tried to take shelter under a tree but the water still made its way to them. They kept hearing noises, shouting; they couldn't tell because it was so dark, but they supposed that these were the sounds of children running, of parents trying to get them out, of attempts to salvage something as they fled. In a few minutes, there were twenty or thirty people under the trees; in hushed tones, as if their anxiety forced them to talk quietly, they tried to understand what was going on.

"I always liked the idea of being the one to teach, organize, run things... I like being able to tell others what I know."

*What were you thinking about when you were there?*

*About death, just death. I had never experienced anything like it. I thought that no one would be able to help us, that the water level would keep rising and, in the end, would cover us all and kill us.*

Almost everyone cried and prayed. Youness asked his God to get him out alive. But he kept hearing the noises and the shouts, and he thought that he had to do something. Two or three men went towards the flood, and Youness decided to go along:

*I am going down there to help out.*

*Please, son, don't go. Don't do it.*

*Please don't.*

Youness tried to explain to his mother that he had to go; his mother was crying and telling him not to, that if he did he would not make it back, that he would die down there. She said that if he went down to help out she would die of a heart attack. Youness stayed where he was; later, that decision would weigh on his soul.

Youness had been born twenty-two years earlier; his childhood was peaceful. He played football with the kids from his town, swam in the river, talked with them about what they would do when they grew up. Youness was good at football and a serious fan of Real Madrid: he used to say that one day he would play, inshAllah, on that team. But he also liked to read and study, and he easily finished grade school. He went on to high school, and when he was twenty

he graduated; the next year, his parents were able to send him to Mohammed V University in Rabat, where Youness wanted to pursue English Studies. But he couldn't; there were no openings in that department, so Youness signed up for French Studies. He was not as successful in this field – 'I didn't like French, and the grammar is so complicated' – and the next year he went back to his town. There, Youness began working every afternoon in a small internet café, and he signed up for a two-year program in clothing design. He thought that, when he was older, he would be able to design jeans, and hence get a job in a big city and "lead a good life." Many of his neighbours had already left because the land had become much less productive due to soil exhaustion. They had migrated to large cities or left the country altogether.

*What does "leading a good life" mean?*

*Having a job, a house, a car and a wonderful woman. That's a good life.*

Until that night when the water came and took everything away. Under the trees, Youness saw – or, rather, heard – how the houses below collapsed under the weight of the water. Youness was convinced that

none of this was really happening, that he was having a nightmare. And he couldn't wake up.

At four in the morning, they heard the sound of some engines; it was the first aid. People from the region who came in small zodiac-type boats or canoes to try to help out. Near dawn the rain stopped; a few hours later, Youness and his parents were able to go back to their house, which was now a ruin full of mud and stones; the furniture, clothing and other objects had been destroyed by the water. They tried to clear a space to rest but they couldn't. Little by little, Youness understood that they no longer had a house and, from that moment on, his life would never be the same.

But the worst was still to come: a little later, Youness learned that Ali, his best friend, had died along with his whole family when the roof to their house collapsed.

*I still think about that night all the time. I can't get it out of my mind; it still pains me.*

*What exactly do you think of?*

*I blame myself. I do, because I didn't do anything for other people, I wasn't able*

*to help them. Especially my friend, who was so close to me, and I didn't do anything for him...*

*Why couldn't you help him?*

*I already told you, I was afraid of death. I didn't want to worry my mother... I don't know, I should have done more to help the others, something more than just looking on.*

At around ten in the morning the water began to recede: everything was covered with mud, trash, chunks of things, dead animals. The public aid services arrived at around midday, too late to save many lives. All they could do was to remove the ruins, recover the bodies. That afternoon, Youness and his family tried to rest in a makeshift refuge of blankets and sheets of plastic; Youness was exhausted but he could not stop thinking about his dead friend, lost house, ruined fields and vanished future.

*Why do you think all that happened?*

*Because of the weather, which has changed so much as a result of globalization. There are too many cars, buses, people, industries, and so the climate is changing and things*

*like this happen: I have lost my home, my land, my friends ...*

That night other aid groups arrived with tents and food. Among them was Naciri, the President of the Association de Soutien aux Espaces Santé Jeunes. A young man of 24 who lives in Rabat, Naciri had received, early that morning, a request for help from local members of the Association. In a few hours, some forty volunteers from this peer's educators net had moved into the area:

*When we arrived, we couldn't believe what we saw: everything was covered with water. The first thing we did was go through the region in some boats that belonged to the Civil Protection Service to try to save the desperate people who were still trapped on the roofs of their houses.*

That same morning they found the head of the local chapter of the Association. He had gotten trapped while trying to save a man who was sinking in the mud. Those mud holes posed the greatest danger; they were covered by a superficial layer of water and, if someone stepped on them without realizing it, they could get trapped for good. Naciri tried to get the two men out but he couldn't; after a few endless moments

pulling on ropes, they were finally able to get them out. Two hours later, when they took Naciri's friend back to the town, he learned that his mother and sister had drowned.

*But the worst thing happened the second day, when we came across a family that was holding out on top of the roof of a house. They saw us and started to call for help. We were on our way to them when we received a warning through the radio. We were told that a second wave of water was about to set in and that we should leave. We tried to make it over to help them, but we saw the water coming and had to move back.*

***Did you agree with the decision to withdrawal?***

*We had no choice. If we stayed, we would have died as well. But it was awful. I was left with such a feeling of sadness. I couldn't sleep for a long time.*

The young people from the Association worked ceaselessly for three days and three nights, and that was when Youness met them. Days later, when Youness's father decided to take the whole family to the house of his oldest son, in Rabat, they helped them. Youness's family was not the

only one to leave everything behind. In the region there are a many ruined houses, streets and schools, and it will take a great deal of effort to make the land productive again. The figures are not exact, but an estimated 40 percent of the region's inhabitants have not yet returned – and many have no intention of doing so.

***Are you going to go back to your town?***

*No, never.*

***Why not?***

*For many reasons. I am trying to forget about all that and think about my future. I don't think that any of us will return. We no longer have anything there, and we don't want to do anything there either. My best friend died, so why go back? I prefer to think about the time we spent together...*

Now, thanks to the ASESJ, Youness is taking a six-month course to learn to take calls at a call centre. In the meantime, he is doing construction work; his job consists of carrying buckets and stones and bricks about, and they pay him 50 dirhams – about 6 US dollars – for a seven- or eight-hour workday.

*This is not what I should be doing. I have a degree; this is not a real job.*

He says, almost ashamed.

*It's just that for now I have to do this to get by and help my family, to forget about all that and start to live again.*

Youness is sad and confused. He thinks that he might be able to go to England, which has always attracted him. He believes it has a lot to offer people who want to live there; he says, for instance, that if you have a diploma you can get a job easily. Meanwhile, he is still taking courses and working, and trying to have some good moments. He has a girlfriend, but he says that, at least for now, it's nothing serious, just someone with whom to talk and have fun.

*You know, teenagers...*

***But you're 22.***

Youness laughs for the first time and acknowledges:

*It's true, I am 22. I had better get on with it if I want to have a future.*

## MIGRATION

### RISING TEMPERATURE AND MOVING POPULATIONS

As early as 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change stated that the most severe impact on populations from climate change may be the displacement of people.<sup>1</sup> The report talked about “millions” of people. Today, migration remains one of the key issues when discussing climate change impact, but estimates are very difficult to make, due to lack of data and the complexity of migration issues, in particular with regards to the differentiation between voluntary and forced migration. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has pointed out that projections of people on the move due to climate change vary between 25 million and 1 billion.<sup>2</sup> The rather large differences in projections depend on which of the scenarios of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change one chooses as base, as well as which definition of “migration” is used. It is however clear that we can expect a significant increase in the movement of people because of climate change.

There are mainly two environmental push elements that can lead to migration: Sudden onset events with a direct impact, such as hurricanes, floods or droughts, and slow onset events, that is to say the progressive evolution of the environment, such as raising sea-levels.<sup>3</sup> While not all environmental change can be clearly linked to climate change, climate change is predicted to increase the force and frequency of the two push elements. As these two types of causes for migration could almost be considered dichotomies, the characteristics, responses and therefore consequences differ greatly.

Hurricanes and floods are events that are easy to identify when they occur, and to some extent we can also predict where they are likely to occur. With that knowledge, mitigation as well as early adaptation strategies can be put in place. On the other hand, there is no way of predicting how climate change will affect when or where natural disasters will occur in the coming century. Under unfortunate circumstances, the impact might be dire and large populations risk being temporarily displaced from their homes, perhaps not being able to return for many years.

While many of the populations who are more likely to be forced to migrate because of climate change live in developing countries, the poorest and most vulnerable are not necessarily the most likely to migrate. Migration as an adaptation strategy is very costly. One typically must have access to financial capital and social network in the place of destination. Furthermore, migration disrupts cultural and political life. Migration caused by climate change will hence not only depend on actual climate change, but also on economic, cultural, political and social factors.<sup>4</sup>

This means that responses to climate change induced movement of people must take more factors into account. For example, a gender perspective is essential; both if the migration is temporary or permanent. Displaced women are more vulnerable than men, as women often have a lower status than men and can expect their needs to be less attended to.

When a new life has to be formed after permanently migrating, the socio-economic status of migrant women may be affected by the fact that migrant women more often end up in the informal employment sector or having to carry out domestic work; in particular under precarious working conditions. Migrant women risk health concerns relating to potential difficulties in accessing social services in general and reproductive health services in particular, due to language barriers and legal and/or financial fences. Security is also an issue, as migrant women are more likely to be victims of domestic violence and abuse.<sup>5</sup>

While there are challenges, one must also remember that migration will, for some populations, be a necessary way of adapting to climate change in the coming century. Migration as adaptation strategy has indeed been present all through human history. It is therefore crucial to give attention to concerns for migrant populations, including migrant women and youth, both before, during and after moving.