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From Sustainability to Symbiosis: Lifestyles as Laboratories of the Symbiocene

Rita Lankauskienė^{1,*} and Giedrė Rulevienė²

¹ Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences, Institute of Economics and Rural Development, 01108 Vilnius, Lithuania

² Off-Grid Farm “Portugal It Is”, Pedrógão de São Pedro, 6090-441 Castelo Branco, Portugal; giedretutkute@yahoo.co.uk

* Correspondence: rita.lankauskiene@ekvi.lt

Abstract

Off-grid and low-impact lifestyles have emerged as important sites of socio-ecological experimentation that challenge conventional understandings of sustainability. This study examines the initiative ‘Portugal It Is’, a Lithuanian diaspora homestead in rural Portugal, as a qualitative case through which to explore the relevance of such lifestyles to the emerging concept of the Symbiocene. Using an abductive case study approach informed by the Biomimetic–Organizational Ecology framework, the research draws on a longitudinal analysis of publicly available video narratives, supplemented by field observations and informal research conversations. The findings indicate that the transition to off-grid living involved processes of adaptive learning, ecological stewardship, livelihood diversification, and the development of new relationships with local communities, digital networks, and ecological systems. Rather than achieving complete self-sufficiency, the initiative evolved through forms of socio-ecological interdependence and relational value creation. The study develops and empirically illustrates the concept of symbiotic livelihoods to describe livelihood arrangements that integrate environmental care, adaptive learning, and community engagement. The findings suggest that off-grid initiatives can function as experimental niches in which alternative human-nature-economy relationships are developed and refined. The paper contributes to sustainability transitions literature by advancing a regenerative and co-evolutionary perspective on emerging socio-ecological futures.

Keywords: Symbiocene; symbiotic livelihoods; off-grid living; lifestyle migration; sustainability transitions; socio-ecological re-embedding; Biomimetic–Organizational Ecology (BOE); regenerative practices; qualitative case study; Lithuanian diaspora

Academic Editor: Babatunde Olubayo

Received: 22 June 2026

Revised: 22 July 2026

Accepted: 29 July 2026

Published: 30 July 2026

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1. Introduction

Contemporary environmental challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, resource depletion, and increasing socio-economic inequalities, are increasingly understood as consequences of prevailing systems of production, consumption, and socio-economic organization. These interconnected crises have intensified debates about the sustainability of dominant development models and the capacity of existing institutions to respond effectively to complex socio-ecological challenges [1–3]. These debates have also stimulated growing interest in alternative ways of organizing livelihoods, production, and human–environment relationships that seek to respond to these intercon-

nected challenges. While sustainable development has served as the dominant framework for addressing such challenges for more than three decades, scholars have increasingly questioned whether current sustainability approaches can generate the transformative changes required to remain within planetary boundaries while ensuring human well-being [4–6].

In response, sustainability research has increasingly embraced regenerative and systems-oriented perspectives that emphasize ecological restoration, resilience, and the interconnectedness of human and natural systems [7,8]. Recent scholarship has similarly emphasized sustainability transformations grounded in relational approaches to human–nature interactions and regenerative development pathways [9]. Among these emerging perspectives, the concept of the Symbiocene has attracted growing attention as a normative vision of a future society based on mutualism, ecological reciprocity, and the flourishing of both human and non-human life [10–12]. The Symbiocene proposes a shift away from anthropocentric and extractive relationships toward forms of living that are grounded in cooperation, co-evolution, and ecological stewardship. Although the concept has stimulated important theoretical discussions, empirical research examining how Symbiocene principles may be expressed in everyday practices and livelihood strategies remains limited.

One potentially important context for exploring these questions is the growing movement toward off-grid and low-impact living. Across Europe and other regions, increasing numbers of individuals and households are experimenting with off-grid and low-impact lifestyle practices that seek to reduce dependence on centralized infrastructures while strengthening connections with local ecosystems and communities [13–15]. Such initiatives often combine renewable energy systems, ecological construction, food self-provisioning, regenerative land management, and localized economic activities. While off-grid lifestyles are frequently associated with self-sufficiency, they may also be interpreted as attempts to develop new forms of ecological and social interdependence.

The rise of off-grid living is closely linked to broader processes of lifestyle migration. Lifestyle migration research demonstrates that increasing numbers of individuals relocate in pursuit of alternative ways of life characterized by environmental quality, autonomy, personal fulfilment, and value-based living rather than solely economic motivations [16,17]. Rural destinations often become sites where migrants seek closer engagement with nature, greater control over everyday life, and opportunities to experiment with alternative livelihood strategies [18,19]. At the same time, sustainability transitions scholarship has highlighted the significance of grassroots initiatives and experimental niches as spaces where alternative socio-technical and socio-ecological arrangements can emerge and evolve [20–22].

Despite growing scholarly interest in both lifestyle migration and off-grid living, important gaps remain. Existing studies have largely focused on migration motivations, place attachment, identity formation, sustainable consumption, and self-sufficiency practices. Comparatively less attention has been paid to how off-grid initiatives reorganize relationships among people, ecosystems, technologies, communities, and economic activities in ways that may prefigure alternative socio-ecological futures. Furthermore, little research has explored such initiatives through the lens of emerging post-Anthropocene perspectives such as the Symbiocene.

This paper addresses this gap by examining an off-grid lifestyle initiative developed by Lithuanian emigrants in central Portugal. Known as ‘Portugal It Is’, the initiative documents the gradual transformation of an abandoned rural property into a functioning off-grid homestead supported by renewable energy systems, ecological restoration practices, food production, digital entrepreneurship, and community engagement. The case provides an opportunity to investigate how alternative livelihoods emerge through the interaction of migration, environmental stewardship, technological adaptation, and social learning.

The study conceptualizes these processes as forms of socio-ecological re-embedding through which individuals reconstruct everyday life around direct engagement with ecological systems, local resource flows, and community networks. Rather than interpreting off-grid living solely as a pursuit of independence, the paper argues that such initiatives frequently involve the creation of new forms of ecological and relational interdependence. This perspective shifts attention from self-sufficiency toward the ways in which livelihoods are co-produced through interactions among people, ecosystems, technologies, and social networks.

To investigate these dynamics, the paper employs a qualitative case study approach informed by Biomimetic–Organizational Ecology (BOE), service-dominant logic, and Symbiocene theory. Particular attention is given to the emergence of what are termed *symbiotic livelihoods*, defined as livelihood arrangements that generate economic, social, and ecological value through mutually reinforcing relationships among people, ecosystems, technologies, communities, and non-human actors. The concept provides an analytical bridge between discussions of sustainability transitions, lifestyle migration, regenerative practices, and emerging Symbiocene-oriented forms of socio-ecological organization.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question: *How do off-grid lifestyle initiatives contribute to the development of symbiotic livelihoods, and what insights do they provide into emerging Symbiocene-oriented forms of socio-ecological organization?*

The paper contributes to several strands of scholarship. First, it extends lifestyle migration research by examining migration as a process of socio-ecological re-embedding. Second, it contributes to off-grid and low-impact living studies by highlighting the relational and ecological dimensions of livelihood formation. Third, it enriches sustainability transitions research by examining how small-scale rural initiatives function as experimental niches for alternative socio-ecological arrangements. Finally, it contributes to emerging empirical discussions of the Symbiocene by exploring how principles of mutualism, regeneration, ecological stewardship, and relational value creation are enacted in everyday practices.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the conceptual framework, integrating insights from sustainability transitions, lifestyle migration, off-grid living studies, Biomimetic–Organizational Ecology, and Symbiocene theory. Section 3 outlines the research methodology and case study design. Section 4 presents the empirical findings. Section 5 discusses the implications of the findings for understanding symbiotic livelihoods and socio-ecological transformation. Section 6 concludes by highlighting the study's contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Conceptual Framework

The transition from sustainability towards more regenerative and symbiotic forms of development requires analytical approaches capable of capturing the dynamic relationships among people, ecosystems, technologies, and livelihoods. To investigate these relationships, this study draws upon five complementary bodies of literature: sustainability transitions, lifestyle migration, off-grid living, Biomimetic–Organizational Ecology (BOE), and Symbiocene theory. Together, these perspectives provide the conceptual foundation for interpreting off-grid lifestyle initiatives as socio-ecological experiments through which alternative forms of livelihood, community, and human–nature interdependence may emerge.

2.1. Sustainability Transitions and Experimental Niches

Addressing contemporary sustainability challenges requires transformations that extend beyond incremental improvements in existing socio-economic systems. Sustainability transitions research has emerged as an influential field for understanding how large-scale societal changes occur and how more sustainable forms of production, consumption, governance, and everyday life can develop over time [20,22]. Rather than viewing change as a

linear process, transition scholars conceptualize transformations as complex and multi-dimensional processes involving interactions among technologies, institutions, social practices, cultural values, and ecological conditions.

One of the most influential approaches within sustainability transitions research is the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP), which explains transitions through interactions among three analytical levels: socio-technical niches, socio-technical regimes, and the broader socio-technical landscape [20,23]. Regimes represent dominant configurations of technologies, infrastructures, institutions, and social practices that stabilize existing systems. Landscape pressures such as climate change, economic crises, demographic shifts, and environmental degradation create pressures for change. Niches function as protected spaces where alternative ideas, practices, and technologies can emerge and develop outside the constraints imposed by dominant regimes.

Within this perspective, grassroots innovations and community-based initiatives play an important role because they create opportunities for experimentation with alternative socio-ecological arrangements [21]. Such initiatives frequently operate on a small scale and may initially appear marginal. However, they often provide valuable environments for learning, adaptation, and the development of new social practices that can challenge established systems. Sustainability transitions are therefore not driven exclusively by technological innovation but also by changes in lifestyles, values, organizational forms, and human–environment relationships [24].

Recent transition scholarship has increasingly recognized the importance of social innovation, local experimentation, and place-based initiatives in enabling transformative change [22]. This shift reflects growing awareness that sustainability challenges cannot be addressed solely through technological solutions but require broader reconfigurations of social and ecological relations. Consequently, increasing attention has been directed toward initiatives that experiment with off-grid and low-impact lifestyle practices, working, producing, and consuming.

Off-grid and low-impact living initiatives can be understood as examples of such experimental niches. By reducing dependence on centralized infrastructures and developing alternative arrangements for energy provision, food production, housing, and livelihood generation, these initiatives create spaces in which new socio-ecological practices can be explored and refined. Their significance lies not only in their environmental outcomes but also in their potential to generate new forms of knowledge, social organization, and human–environment interaction.

From a sustainability transitions perspective, off-grid homesteads may therefore be interpreted as socio-ecological laboratories in which alternative futures are actively rehearsed. Although most remain small in scale, they provide opportunities to observe how individuals and communities respond to ecological constraints, develop adaptive capacities, and experiment with new configurations of social and material life. Such initiatives may contribute to broader sustainability transitions by demonstrating viable alternatives to dominant patterns of production, consumption, and resource use.

This perspective is particularly relevant for the present study because the ‘Portugal It Is’ initiative represents a long-term process of experimentation with alternative livelihood strategies, ecological restoration practices, and community-building efforts. Examining the initiative through the lens of sustainability transitions enables the case to be understood not simply as an individual lifestyle choice but as a niche experiment that may offer insights into broader processes of socio-ecological transformation.

2.2. Lifestyle Migration, Off-Grid Living and Socio-Ecological Re-Embedding

Lifestyle migration has emerged as an important field of research examining the movement of individuals and households who relocate primarily in pursuit of a preferred way of life rather than economic necessity [16,17]. Unlike conventional labour migration, lifestyle migration is typically associated with aspirations for improved quality of life, environmental amenities, personal fulfilment, autonomy, and the pursuit of alternative values. Rural destinations frequently attract lifestyle migrants seeking closer engagement with nature, opportunities for self-realization, and alternatives to the perceived pressures of urban-industrial lifestyles [18,19].

Research has shown that lifestyle migration often involves more than geographical relocation. Migrants frequently engage in processes of identity reconstruction, place-making, and the renegotiation of social and economic relationships [17]. Rural migration, in particular, can be associated with efforts to reconnect with local environments, develop new forms of work, and cultivate lifestyles that align more closely with personal values and environmental concerns. Consequently, migration becomes not only a spatial transition but also a transformation in everyday practices and relationships.

Parallel developments can be observed within the growing movement towards off-grid and low-impact living. Off-grid initiatives are typically characterized by reduced reliance on centralized infrastructures and increased engagement with localized systems of energy, water, food production, and housing [13,14]. Such initiatives are frequently associated with environmental values, self-provisioning practices, renewable energy technologies, and efforts to reduce ecological footprints. Existing studies have examined off-grid living through the lenses of sustainability, resilience, ecological citizenship, and alternative consumption [15,25].

However, portraying off-grid living primarily as a pursuit of self-sufficiency risks oversimplifying the complex social and ecological relationships upon which such lifestyles depend. Complete independence from external systems is rarely achieved. Instead, off-grid initiatives often involve the creation of new forms of dependence and interdependence involving ecosystems, local communities, digital networks, knowledge exchanges, and non-human actors. Renewable energy systems depend on ecological conditions, food production relies on soil fertility and biodiversity, and livelihood strategies frequently require collaboration with neighbours, visitors, customers, and online communities.

To capture these dynamics, this study adopts the concept of socio-ecological re-embedding. Drawing inspiration from Polanyi's [26] notion of embeddedness and contemporary social-ecological systems scholarship [3,27], socio-ecological re-embedding refers to the process through which individuals reorganize livelihoods, material practices, and social relations around direct engagement with ecological systems, local resource flows, and community networks. Rather than representing withdrawal from society, re-embedding involves the reconstruction of relationships among human and non-human actors within a particular ecological context.

From this perspective, off-grid living can be understood as a process of reconfiguring rather than eliminating dependencies. Dependence on centralized infrastructures may be reduced, but this is frequently accompanied by increased reliance on ecological knowledge, environmental feedback, social cooperation, and adaptive learning. The resulting livelihoods are therefore not characterized by isolation but by new forms of ecological and relational interconnectedness.

This interpretation provides an important bridge between lifestyle migration and broader sustainability transitions. By re-embedding livelihoods within ecological and social systems, off-grid initiatives create opportunities for experimenting with alternative forms of production, consumption, and community formation. Such experiments may contribute

to the emergence of more regenerative and mutually supportive forms of socio-ecological organization, thereby providing a useful context for exploring the principles associated with the Symbiocene.

2.3. *Biomimetic–Organizational Ecology as an Analytical Framework*

Understanding how alternative livelihood initiatives emerge, adapt, and persist requires analytical approaches capable of capturing interactions among social, ecological, technological, and economic processes. Conventional organizational perspectives often focus on efficiency, growth, and competitive advantage, but such approaches are less suited to off-grid initiatives that operate within highly interconnected socio-ecological environments and depend upon continuous adaptation to changing conditions. Consequently, this study adopts a Biomimetic–Organizational Ecology (BOE) perspective that interprets livelihood initiatives as adaptive systems embedded within broader ecological and social contexts.

The BOE framework draws inspiration from biomimicry, organizational ecology, and social-ecological systems research [3,27–29]. Biomimicry emphasizes learning from natural systems, where long-term viability depends on adaptation, diversity, cooperation, and responsiveness to environmental feedback [28]. Organizational ecology highlights how organizations emerge, evolve, and adapt within changing environments [29], while social-ecological systems scholarship emphasizes resilience, self-organization, and adaptive learning as key conditions for sustainability [3].

Drawing on these perspectives, the BOE framework conceptualizes livelihood initiatives as evolving socio-ecological systems whose development resembles ecological succession. Rather than viewing organizational development as a linear process of growth, the framework emphasizes adaptation, network formation, disturbance responses, and regenerative capacities. This perspective is particularly relevant for off-grid initiatives, which frequently operate under conditions of uncertainty and rely on continuous experimentation with environmental, technological, and social arrangements.

For analytical purposes, five interrelated processes are distinguished: germination, referring to the emergence of a vision and the mobilization of initial resources; rooting and network formation, involving the establishment of material, social, and ecological foundations; canopy expansion, characterized by diversification and increasing system complexity; disturbance, encompassing environmental, technical, financial, and social challenges; and regeneration, through which systems recover, reorganize, and adapt following disruption. These processes should not be understood as strictly sequential stages but as recurring dynamics that may overlap throughout the evolution of an initiative.

Several analytical dimensions are particularly important within this framework. First, niche creation refers to the development of alternative socio-ecological spaces in which new practices can emerge. Second, resource mobilization encompasses the acquisition and management of material, social, ecological, and knowledge-based resources. Third, mutualism highlights relationships that generate benefits for multiple actors, including both human and non-human participants. Fourth, adaptive learning emphasizes experimentation, feedback, and continuous knowledge development. Finally, regenerative capacity refers to the ability of a system to recover, evolve, and maintain its core functions in the face of change and disturbance.

The BOE framework is particularly useful for the present study because it enables the initiative ‘Portugal It Is’ to be examined as a dynamic socio-ecological system rather than simply a household or business venture. By focusing on adaptation, learning, network formation, disturbance management, and regeneration, the framework provides a basis for understanding how off-grid livelihood initiatives evolve over time. It also offers a conceptual bridge between sustainability transitions, lifestyle migration, and Symbiocene thinking by

highlighting the ecological principles that underpin resilience, interdependence, and long-term flourishing.

2.4. *Symbiotic Livelihoods as an Emerging Form of Socio-Ecological Organization*

Livelihoods are commonly understood as the capabilities, assets, and activities through which individuals and communities secure their means of living [30,31]. Traditional livelihood frameworks have focused primarily on access to resources, income generation, and household resilience. However, contemporary sustainability challenges increasingly require approaches that recognize the interdependence of economic, social, and ecological systems. Within this context, livelihood practices can be understood not only as means of survival but also as mechanisms through which relationships among people, communities, and ecosystems are created and maintained.

Building on sustainability transitions, Service-Dominant Logic, and socio-ecological systems perspectives, this study introduces the concept of **symbiotic livelihoods**. Symbiotic livelihoods refer to livelihood arrangements that generate value through mutually beneficial relationships among human actors, communities, technologies, and ecological systems. Rather than prioritizing economic outputs alone, they emphasize ecological stewardship, adaptive learning, collaboration, and long-term system viability. This perspective is consistent with [26] argument that economic activities remain embedded within broader social and ecological relationships rather than operating as autonomous market systems.

Unlike conventional livelihood models that often separate economic activities from environmental considerations, symbiotic livelihoods assume that economic, social, and ecological outcomes are co-produced. Livelihood activities therefore contribute not only to income generation but also to the maintenance of ecosystem functions, community relationships, and knowledge exchange. Such arrangements resonate with broader understandings of social-ecological governance that emphasize stewardship, adaptive management, and collective learning [27].

Several characteristics distinguish symbiotic livelihoods. First, they are grounded in *ecological stewardship*, whereby environmental care becomes an integral component of livelihood activities. Second, they rely on *adaptive learning*, involving experimentation, reflection, and continuous adjustment to changing conditions. Third, they create *relational value*, extending beyond market transactions to include social cohesion, knowledge sharing, and community engagement. Finally, they involve *livelihood diversification*, reducing dependence on a single source of income and enhancing resilience in the face of uncertainty.

In the context of off-grid and low-impact living, symbiotic livelihoods provide a useful lens for understanding how individuals and communities reorganize everyday practices around principles of interdependence and reciprocity. They draw attention to the ways in which economic activities become intertwined with ecological restoration, community building, and place-based learning. As such, the concept offers a bridge between sustainability transitions research and emerging Symbiocene perspectives by highlighting livelihood practices that support mutually beneficial relationships between human and non-human systems.

2.5. *The Symbiocene as an Interpretive Framework*

The concept of the Symbiocene was introduced by [10] as a response to growing concerns regarding the ecological and social consequences of the Anthropocene. While the Anthropocene highlights the unprecedented influence of human activities on Earth systems, the Symbiocene proposes a normative vision of a future epoch characterized by mutually beneficial relationships among humans, other species, and ecological systems. Rather than focusing primarily on environmental decline and planetary disruption, the Symbiocene em-

phasizes cooperation, reciprocity, ecological flourishing, and the cultivation of positive relationships between society and nature [10,12].

The Symbiocene is not intended as a description of current reality but as an aspirational framework that encourages the development of social, economic, and cultural practices capable of supporting long-term coexistence among diverse forms of life. Central to this perspective is the recognition that human well-being is inseparable from the health and resilience of ecological systems. Consequently, the Symbiocene calls for a transition away from extractive and exploitative relationships toward forms of organization that support mutual flourishing and regenerative development. Albrecht [12] further develops the Symbiocene as a normative and practical response to the ecological and social disruptions associated with the Anthropocene, emphasizing mutualistic relationships among humans and non-human systems.

Although the concept has attracted increasing attention within environmental humanities and sustainability scholarship, empirical applications remain relatively limited. Most discussions focus on philosophical, ethical, or cultural dimensions of the Symbiocene, while fewer studies examine how its principles may be expressed through concrete livelihood practices and socio-ecological experiments. This creates an opportunity to explore whether emerging forms of living and organizing exhibit characteristics consistent with Symbiocene thinking.

Building on Albrecht's work, this study interprets the Symbiocene as an analytical and interpretive framework rather than an empirically verifiable social condition. The purpose is not to determine whether a particular initiative has achieved the Symbiocene but rather to examine the extent to which observed practices reflect principles associated with symbiotic and regenerative forms of socio-ecological organization.

For analytical purposes, five dimensions are particularly relevant. The first is ecological stewardship, reflected in practices that maintain or enhance ecosystem health. The second is mutualism, expressed through relationships that generate reciprocal benefits among human and non-human actors. The third is regeneration, involving activities that restore ecological functions and improve the long-term capacity of socio-ecological systems. The fourth is relational value creation, whereby economic and social value emerge through cooperation, knowledge exchange, and community engagement. The fifth is adaptive co-evolution, referring to processes through which human activities become increasingly aligned with ecological dynamics and environmental feedback.

These dimensions provide a useful framework for interpreting the initiative 'Portugal It Is'. Through its combination of ecological restoration, off-grid living, diversified livelihood strategies, digital knowledge sharing, and community engagement, the initiative offers an opportunity to examine how Symbiocene-oriented practices may emerge within everyday life. The framework does not assume that such initiatives are inherently sustainable or fully symbiotic. Rather, it provides a lens for critically evaluating the extent to which they contribute to more regenerative and mutually supportive forms of socio-ecological organization.

The conceptual framework developed in this study integrates sustainability transitions research, lifestyle migration scholarship, off-grid living studies, Biomimetic–Organizational Ecology, and Symbiocene theory into a coherent interpretive model. As illustrated in Figure 1, the framework presents heuristic conceptual relationships among these perspectives rather than a causal or developmental pathway. Within this framework, off-grid lifestyle migration is interpreted as a process of socio-ecological re-embedding that can be understood through adaptive organizational dynamics and the emergence of symbiotic livelihoods. The Symbiocene serves as the broader normative and interpretive framework through which the significance of these livelihood practices is discussed, rather than as an empirically verifiable outcome.

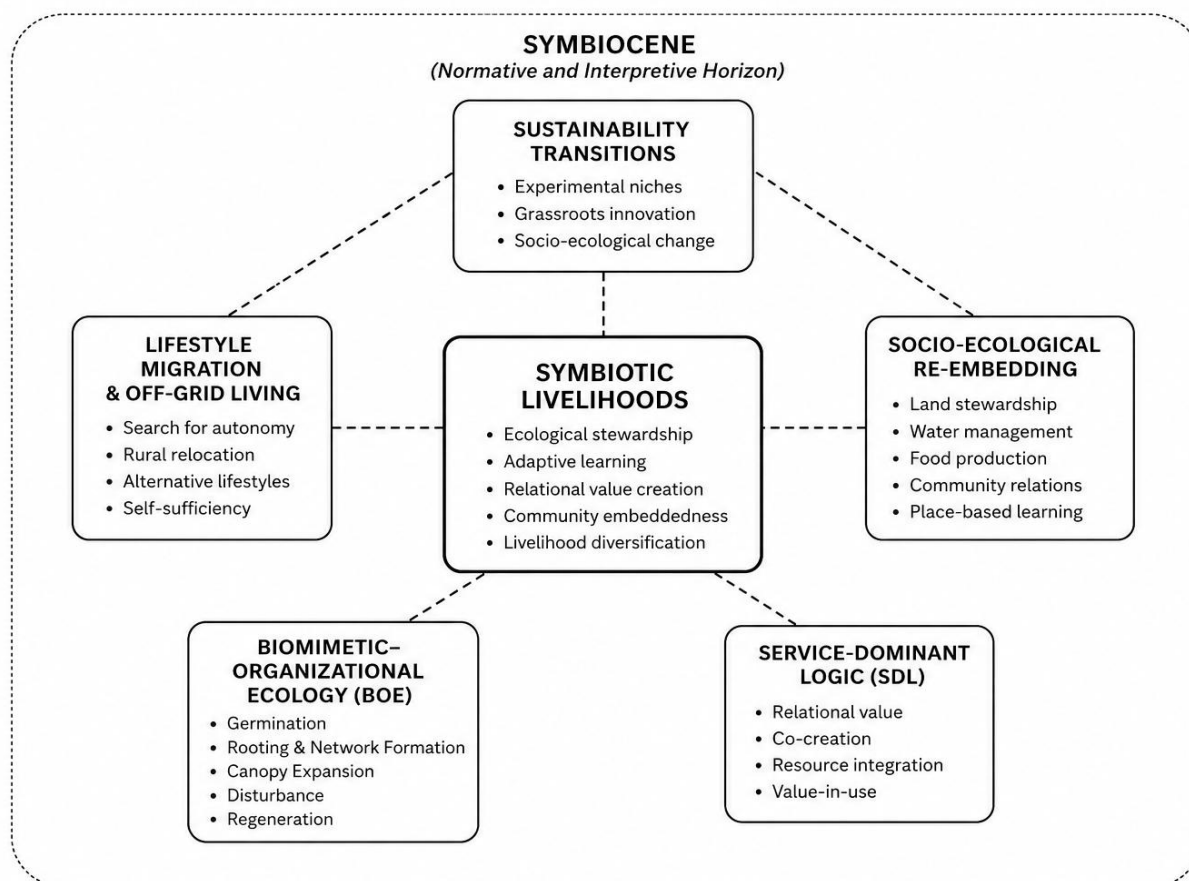


Figure 1. Heuristic conceptual framework guiding the study. Source: Developed by the authors.

Taken together, the concepts of socio-ecological re-embedding, Biomimetic–Organizational Ecology (BOE), service-dominant logic, symbiotic livelihoods, and the Symbiocene inform the conceptual foundation of this study. Within this framework, BOE serves as the primary analytical lens for interpreting the empirical material. Service-dominant logic complements this perspective by informing the analysis of value co-creation and relational resource integration, while the literature on sustainability transitions, lifestyle migration, off-grid living, and socio-ecological re-embedding provides the broader contextual lens within which the case is interpreted. Finally, the Symbiocene functions as a normative and interpretive horizon for discussing the wider implications of the findings rather than as an empirically verifiable outcome. The following Section 3 outlines the methodological approach used to examine the development and evolution of the initiative ‘Portugal It Is’.

3. Materials and Methods

To explore how alternative livelihood practices emerge within an off-grid socio-ecological context, this study employs an exploratory qualitative case study design. The research focuses on the initiative ‘Portugal It Is’ and draws upon publicly available video narratives documenting its development over time. An abductive analytical approach was used to identify recurring themes and interpret them through the lenses of sustainability transitions, socio-ecological re-embedding, Biomimetic–Organizational Ecology, and Symbiocene theory.

3.1. Research Design

This study employs an exploratory qualitative case study design [32] to examine how an off-grid lifestyle initiative contributes to the development of symbiotic livelihoods and how such practices may be interpreted through the lens of the Symbiocene. A case study approach was considered appropriate because the research focuses on a contemporary socio-ecological phenomenon situated within a real-world context, where the boundaries between ecological, social, technological, and economic processes are difficult to separate.

The study adopts an abductive analytical strategy [33], combining inductive insights emerging from the empirical material with concepts derived from sustainability transitions research, lifestyle migration studies, Biomimetic–Organizational Ecology (BOE), service-dominant logic, and Symbiocene theory. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the research seeks to develop theoretically informed interpretations grounded in empirical observations.

3.2. Case Selection

The empirical focus of the study is the initiative ‘Portugal It Is’, an off-grid homestead established by Lithuanian emigrants in Pedrógão de São Pedro, Castelo Branco, central Portugal. The case was selected through purposive sampling [34] because it combines several dimensions central to the research objectives, including lifestyle migration, off-grid living, ecological restoration, renewable energy adoption, food self-provisioning, digital entrepreneurship, and community engagement.

The initiative is particularly suitable for longitudinal qualitative analysis because its development has been extensively documented through publicly accessible video narratives published on the ‘Portugal It Is’ YouTube channel. Unlike many off-grid projects that remain poorly documented, the initiative provides rich insight into everyday practices, decision-making processes, challenges, failures, adaptations, and livelihood strategies over time.

The case is not intended to be statistically representative of off-grid communities in general. Instead, it serves as an analytically informative case through which broader theoretical propositions concerning socio-ecological re-embedding, adaptive livelihood formation, and Symbiocene-oriented practices can be explored.

3.3. Data Collection

The primary dataset consisted of publicly available videos published on the ‘Portugal It Is’ YouTube channel. Videos were selected purposively to capture key stages in the development of the initiative, including migration experiences, property acquisition, infrastructure development, renewable energy implementation, ecological restoration, food production, livelihood diversification, and reflections on everyday life.

A total of 15 videos were included in the final corpus (Table 1), covering the period from 2023 to 2026 and representing approximately 9 h of audiovisual material. The selected videos document the gradual transformation of an abandoned rural property into a functioning off-grid homestead and provide longitudinal insight into migration experiences, ecological restoration, infrastructure development, livelihood diversification, and community engagement.

The video corpus comprised publicly available YouTube videos produced by the initiative over time. The material represented a mixed format, including personal video diaries, documentation of everyday activities, educational demonstrations, reflections on off-grid living, and occasional project updates. The analysis focused on the spoken narratives contained in the video transcripts, while visual material was used only to support contextual interpretation.

Table 1. Overview of the analyzed video corpus.

No.	Short Video Title	Year	Main Analytical Focus
1.	Buying Our Off-Grid Land	2023	Land acquisition; migration decision; project vision
2.	Our Off-Grid Journey	2023	Migration experience; expectations and adaptation
3.	Off-Grid Life in Rustic Portugal	2023	Everyday off-grid practices
4.	Two Years Off-Grid	2024	Development trajectory; infrastructure creation
5.	A Week of Wins and Mistakes	2024	Learning processes; challenges and adaptation
6.	Stone Barn & Garden	2024	Renovation; food gathering; seasonal activities
7.	Homestead Development	2024	Homestead improvement; resource management
8.	Rebuilding Our Power System	2025	Technological adaptation; energy resilience
9.	A Day on the Off-Grid Farm	2025	Everyday routines; ecological interactions
10.	Discover Off-Grid Living	2025	Lifestyle narratives; place attachment
11.	Moving into the Stone Barn	2025	Housing transition; project milestones
12.	Barn Transformation	2025	Restoration process; home-making
13.	Our First Bees	2026	Biodiversity; beekeeping; ecological stewardship
14.	Saving the Orchard	2026	Landscape restoration; stewardship
15.	Be Our Neighbours	2026	Community formation; local integration

Source: prepared by authors.

The selected corpus was designed to capture both the developmental trajectory of the initiative and the diversity of practices through which off-grid living, livelihood formation, ecological stewardship, and community engagement were enacted over time.

Video transcripts were generated and manually reviewed prior to analysis. Where necessary, transcription errors were corrected to improve readability and analytical reliability. Video descriptions and contextual information published alongside the videos were also consulted to clarify chronology and provide supplementary contextual information.

The use of publicly available digital narratives has become increasingly common within qualitative social science research because such materials provide direct access to participants' own accounts, experiences, and interpretations of everyday life. In the present study, the videos were treated as naturally occurring qualitative data rather than as responses generated through researcher intervention.

In addition to the video material, the first author conducted a site visit to the 'Portugal It Is' homestead in September 2025, including approximately three hours of semi-structured conversations with the homestead owners. Although these conversations were not treated as a formal interview dataset and were not subjected to systematic coding, they provided valuable contextual information that supported interpretation of the video narratives and reconstruction of the project's developmental trajectory.

3.4. Data Analysis

The transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following the approach developed by [35]. Reflexive thematic analysis was selected because it provides a flexible yet systematic framework for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets while allowing theoretical interpretation.

The primary unit of analysis was the transcript excerpt, which was coded and interpreted as part of the iterative thematic analysis. The videos constituted the documentary corpus, while thematic categories were developed across the complete dataset rather than within individual videos. Quotations presented in the Results are identified by their source video to enable traceability to the original material listed in Table 1 and are included as illustrative examples of the broader thematic patterns identified through the analysis.

The analysis proceeded in four stages.

First, all transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the material and to reconstruct the developmental trajectory of the initiative. During this stage, preliminary analytical notes were recorded concerning recurring topics, events, and emerging themes.

Second, open coding was conducted. Codes were assigned to segments of text relating to migration motivations, lifestyle aspirations, environmental values, autonomy, self-provisioning, technological adaptation, livelihood strategies, community relations, ecological practices, learning processes, failures, challenges, and future aspirations.

Third, individual codes were grouped into broader thematic categories through an iterative process of comparison and refinement. Particular attention was given to recurring patterns concerning socio-ecological relationships, adaptive learning, resource management, and livelihood development.

Fourth, the resulting themes were interpreted through the conceptual framework developed in Section 2. This involved two complementary analytical steps. The first mapped empirical findings onto the Biomimetic–Organizational Ecology framework, focusing on processes of germination, rooting and network formation, canopy expansion, disturbance, and regeneration. The second examined the extent to which observed practices exhibited characteristics associated with the Symbiocene, including ecological stewardship, mutualism, regeneration, relational value creation, and adaptive co-evolution.

Throughout the analysis, attention was paid not only to evidence supporting the emergence of symbiotic livelihood practices but also to observations that complicated, challenged, or contradicted such interpretations. The primary coding and initial theme development were conducted by the first author. During theme refinement, potentially disconfirming observations, including continued dependence on purchased technologies, external markets, digital platforms, and assistance from personal networks, were considered alongside evidence supporting the emerging interpretation. The second author, as an insider to the initiative, did not perform the primary coding of the dataset but contributed contextual clarification and reviewed the developing interpretations for factual accuracy, chronological consistency, and possible overstatement. Alternative interpretations were discussed between the authors and examined by returning to the relevant transcripts and video material. Final themes were retained only when supported by the empirical material, while contradictory observations and tensions were incorporated into the analysis rather than excluded.

To enhance transparency and traceability of the qualitative analysis, selected verbatim quotations are presented in Section 4 together with the corresponding video identification number and approximate timestamp.

3.5. Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Several strategies were employed to enhance analytical rigor. First, the analysis was based on a longitudinal dataset documenting the initiative over an extended period rather than on isolated observations. Second, coding decisions were developed through repeated engagement with the transcripts and iterative comparison across videos. Third, interpretations were grounded in direct empirical evidence and supported by illustrative quotations where appropriate. In addition, a site visit to the ‘Portugal It Is’ homestead conducted in September 2025 provided opportunities for direct observation of the physical setting, infrastructure, land-use practices, and everyday operation of the initiative. The site visit included

approximately three hours of informal research conversations with the homestead owners. Together, the visit and the conversations contributed to contextual understanding of the case by providing familiarity with the physical setting, everyday practices, and the development of the homestead over time. These observations informed the interpretation of the video narratives by allowing the researchers to assess whether the documented practices were broadly consistent with conditions observed on site. However, the conversations and field observations were not systematically coded or analysed as a separate dataset.

The study aims for analytical rather than statistical generalization [32]. The objective is not to make representative claims about all off-grid initiatives but to generate theoretically informed insights into the processes through which alternative socio-ecological livelihoods emerge and evolve.

Because one of the authors is directly involved in the development of the initiative examined in this study, particular attention was paid to reflexivity throughout the analytical process. This insider position provided detailed contextual and longitudinal knowledge but also created a risk that familiar practices or preferred interpretations could be taken for granted. To reduce this risk, the first author retained primary responsibility for coding and initial theme development, while the insider co-author contributed contextual clarification and reviewed the interpretations for factual accuracy and possible overstatement. The authors discussed the interpretations collaboratively and checked them against the original transcripts and video material, including observations that complicated or contradicted the emerging themes. The insider perspective was therefore treated as both a valuable contextual resource and a potential source of interpretive influence.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The study is based primarily on publicly available materials intentionally shared by the content creators in the public domain through the 'Portugal It Is' YouTube channel. These materials were analysed as naturally occurring qualitative data. In addition, contextual insights were obtained during a site visit conducted in September 2025 and through informal research conversations with the homestead owners. As one of the co-authors is directly involved in the initiative and participated voluntarily in the research process, no issues related to anonymity arose.

The study did not involve surveys, experiments, intervention-based research, or the collection of sensitive personal data. Consequently, formal ethical approval was not required under the institutional regulations applicable to this research. All empirical materials were used exclusively for scholarly purposes and analysed with due consideration for accuracy, transparency, and responsible interpretation.

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5) to support language editing, improve readability, refine manuscript structure, and enhance the clarity of academic writing. AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, revised, and verified by the authors. ChatGPT was not used for the study design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of the findings, or formulation of the scientific conclusions. The authors take full responsibility for the content of this manuscript.

4. Results

The analysis revealed a dynamic process through which off-grid living was imagined, implemented, and continuously adapted in everyday practice. Rather than representing a single lifestyle choice, the transition unfolded as a series of interconnected decisions involving mobility, housing, food production, energy use, landscape management, and community engagement. Five interrelated themes emerged from the data: leaving the conventional path, learning to live with the land, building self-reliance through practice, negotiating community and belonging, and envisioning future sustainability. Together, these themes illus-

trate how off-grid living is constructed through ongoing interactions between people, place, technology, and ecological systems.

4.1. *Leaving the Conventional Path*

The transition to off-grid living was consistently framed as a deliberate departure from conventional socio-economic expectations. Across the video narratives, participants reflected on the limitations of mainstream work-centred lifestyles and described their move to rural Portugal as an opportunity to pursue greater autonomy, purpose, and alignment with personal values. Rather than portraying off-grid living as withdrawal from society, the participants presented it as an active process of creating an alternative way of life grounded in self-determination and long-term commitment.

A recurring theme throughout the dataset was the perception that the transition should have been undertaken earlier. Reflecting on their experience, the creators stated:

“It’s a fact we haven’t started it earlier” (Video 10, approximately 1:30). This sentiment appeared repeatedly across the narratives and suggests that the move was understood not as a temporary experiment but as a meaningful life project.

The purchase of the property represented a symbolic and practical turning point in this transition. After several months of uncertainty and delays associated with the acquisition process, the moment of finally securing the land was described as the realization of a long-held aspiration. As one participant explained, “Finally, after the long four-month wait, the dream come true” (Video 1, approximately 0:45). The property was not presented as a finished homestead but as a landscape of opportunities requiring substantial work, learning, and adaptation.

Importantly, the narratives rarely emphasized comfort or financial gain as primary motivations. Instead, participants highlighted the desire to regain control over everyday necessities such as housing, food, water, and energy. The move to Portugal was repeatedly associated with a search for a more intentional lifestyle in which personal effort, practical knowledge, and direct engagement with the environment would replace many forms of dependence on external systems.

The findings therefore suggest that the initial stage of the transition was characterised by a conscious re-evaluation of dominant social and economic norms. The decision to pursue off-grid living emerged not only as a relocation strategy but also as a broader attempt to redefine relationships with work, consumption, and everyday life. This shift established the foundation upon which subsequent practices of learning, adaptation, and ecological engagement were built.

4.2. *Learning to Live with the Land*

Following the acquisition of the property, the focus of the initiative shifted from relocation to adaptation. The videos document a gradual process of learning how to live within the opportunities and constraints of the local environment. Rather than imposing a predetermined development plan, the participants frequently described the need to observe, experiment, and adjust their activities in response to landscape conditions, seasonal changes, and available resources.

Water management emerged as one of the most important themes in the dataset. Numerous videos focused on wells, irrigation systems, ponds, and strategies for coping with the dry conditions characteristic of central Portugal. Access to water was consistently portrayed as a prerequisite for both food production and long-term viability of the homestead. Rather than treating water as a simple technical resource, participants increasingly discussed it as a central element shaping everyday decisions and future plans.

The importance of ecological observation is evident in discussions of soil quality, vegetation, and land restoration. Throughout the videos, participants frequently assessed the condition of orchards, gardens, terraces, and surrounding vegetation, often adapting their activities based on direct observations of environmental change. Such observations informed decisions regarding planting, irrigation, grazing possibilities, and habitat management.

The restoration of neglected land formed another important dimension of the project. Several videos documented efforts to recover abandoned orchards, maintain mature olive trees, improve access to overgrown areas, and preserve productive landscapes that might otherwise deteriorate. In discussing the neighbouring orchard, the participants explained their desire to prevent its decline and highlighted the value of existing fruit trees, olive groves, and cultivated spaces that had been cared for over decades. Reflecting on the neighbouring property, they noted that “the garden of this property has been looked after, flourished, loved for the last 50 years or so” and emphasized the importance of preserving these resources rather than allowing them to be neglected (Video 14, approximately 2:45).

The videos also reveal a growing awareness of the relationships between different components of the local ecosystem. This is particularly visible in discussions surrounding beekeeping, where attention shifted beyond honey production towards pollination, biodiversity, and the health of the surrounding landscape. The arrival of the first bee swarm was presented not merely as the acquisition of a productive asset but as the establishment of a new ecological relationship within the homestead environment. Similar perspectives emerged in relation to birds, wildlife, grazing animals, and the management of vegetation.

Learning frequently occurred through direct engagement rather than formal expertise. This orientation towards learning through practice is reflected in the participants’ own descriptions of the early stages of the project:

“We have no experience absolutely about planting the trees... We’ll see. Maybe we’ll be able to save them in the future.” (Video 1, approximately 11:20)

Rather than presenting expertise as a prerequisite, this statement illustrates a willingness to experiment, observe, and gradually adapt to the conditions encountered on the land. Participants openly acknowledged limited prior knowledge regarding agriculture, construction, irrigation, and beekeeping, yet repeatedly described a willingness to experiment and adapt. New skills were developed incrementally through observation, trial and error, advice from neighbours, online communities, and family members possessing specialist knowledge. In one example, the management of bee colonies involved seeking guidance from an experienced family member while simultaneously documenting the learning process for viewers.

Importantly, the relationship with the land evolved over time. Early videos often focused on transforming and improving the property, whereas later narratives increasingly emphasized stewardship, maintenance, and care. The participants gradually shifted from viewing the landscape primarily as a project to be developed towards understanding it as a living environment requiring continuous attention and reciprocal engagement. This transition is particularly evident in activities aimed at preserving mature trees, improving habitats, supporting pollinators, and maintaining ecological productivity.

Overall, the findings suggest that adaptation to off-grid living involved more than technical problem-solving. It required the development of practical ecological knowledge and a growing sensitivity to the characteristics of the local environment. The homestead became not only a place of residence and production but also a site of ongoing learning shaped by interactions between people, land, water, plants, animals, and seasonal processes.

4.3. Learning to Live Off-Grid

A recurring theme throughout the video corpus was the continuous process of learning required to establish and maintain an off-grid lifestyle. The participants frequently emphasized that many of the skills necessary for homestead development, infrastructure construction, energy management, food production, and property maintenance had to be acquired through practice. Rather than following a predetermined blueprint, the project evolved through experimentation, problem-solving, and repeated adaptation to changing circumstances.

The renovation of the abandoned stone barn illustrates this process particularly well. Several videos document the gradual transformation of the structure into a functional living space, a process that extended over multiple years and required substantial physical labour, technical improvisation, and financial investment. The eventual move into the renovated building was presented as a major milestone, symbolizing the transition from temporary settlement to a more permanent way of life. Reflecting on this achievement, the participants described the moment as the culmination of two years of work dedicated to converting the abandoned structure into a home (Video 11, approximately 1:20).

Learning was equally evident in the development of technical systems. Energy independence required continuous adjustment and upgrading of solar infrastructure, batteries, and electrical installations. Rather than presenting renewable energy systems as simple solutions, the videos frequently documented technical difficulties, design limitations, and the need for ongoing improvements. Infrastructure development was therefore portrayed as an evolving process rather than a completed achievement. One participant commented while rebuilding the off-grid power system: *“We’ll try to sort it out ourselves—it’s not rocket science”* (Video 8, approximately 1:40).

The videos also indicate that the pursuit of greater autonomy remained dependent on purchased technologies, financial investment, and periodic technical support, suggesting that off-grid living involved the reconfiguration rather than the elimination of external dependencies.

The same pattern appeared in relation to water management, irrigation systems, gardening practices, and property maintenance. Participants openly discussed mistakes, unexpected outcomes, and the need to revise earlier decisions. This iterative approach is illustrated by one participant’s reflection during the development of the homestead:

“We’re digging, digging, and like it always happens, we came up with a brilliant idea... This might not work... Fingers crossed.” (Video 2, approximately 5:30)

The quotation captures the experimental character of the project, where practical solutions emerged through trial, reflection, and a willingness to accept uncertainty rather than through predefined technical plans. Challenges were rarely concealed. Instead, they became part of the narrative of off-grid living, reinforcing the view that competence develops through experience rather than expertise alone.

Importantly, learning was not limited to technical skills. The participants also described a gradual adjustment to seasonal rhythms, climatic conditions, and the practical realities of rural life. Daily activities were frequently organised around weather conditions, available daylight, water availability, and the needs of plants and animals. This required flexibility and an ongoing willingness to modify routines in response to environmental conditions.

The videos also reveal the importance of informal knowledge networks. Advice from neighbours, family members, friends, and online communities frequently informed decision-making. For example, beekeeping practices were developed through consultation with experienced relatives, while construction projects benefited from assistance provided by

friends and visiting supporters. In one account, the installation of a solar energy system was facilitated through the support of technically skilled friends who helped design and implement components of the system (Video 12, approximately 8:20).

Failures and setbacks formed an integral part of the learning process. Equipment breakdowns, construction delays, unexpected expenses, and environmental challenges repeatedly disrupted plans. Yet such disturbances were generally framed as opportunities for improvement rather than reasons to abandon the project. The participants consistently demonstrated a willingness to reassess previous decisions, test alternative solutions, and invest additional effort when required.

This emphasis on experimentation contributed to a culture of adaptive problem-solving that permeated the initiative. Rather than seeking perfect solutions from the outset, participants adopted an incremental approach in which systems were continuously refined through practical experience. The videos therefore portray off-grid living not as a static state of self-sufficiency but as an ongoing process of learning, adjustment, and resilience-building.

Overall, the findings suggest that the development of the homestead depended less on pre-existing expertise than on the capacity to learn from experience. Knowledge emerged through everyday interactions with technologies, landscapes, animals, and other people. In this sense, off-grid living was not simply a lifestyle choice but an educational process through which new forms of competence, confidence, and adaptability were gradually developed.

4.4. Beyond Self-Sufficiency: People, Networks and New Livelihoods

Although the ‘Portugal It Is’ initiative is frequently presented as an off-grid project, the empirical material reveals that its development was deeply embedded in a wide range of social relationships and support networks. Rather than representing a movement towards complete independence, the homestead evolved through continuous interaction with neighbours, friends, family members, local communities, and online audiences. The findings therefore challenge simplified understandings of self-sufficiency and suggest that off-grid living often depends upon diverse forms of interdependence.

Support from personal networks played an important role throughout the development of the project. Construction activities, technical installations, and infrastructure improvements frequently involved assistance from friends and family members possessing specialized knowledge or practical skills. In one example, the participants described how the installation of their solar energy system was facilitated through the support of technically experienced friends who helped design and implement key components of the system. Similarly, family members contributed advice regarding beekeeping, food production, and other aspects of homestead management. These examples illustrate that knowledge was often co-produced through collaborative relationships rather than acquired individually.

Relationships with local residents also emerged as an important element of adaptation. This everyday integration into the local community is illustrated by one participant’s remark:

“We’ve got some lovely neighbours” (Video 1, approximately 2:10).

The participants regularly described interactions with Portuguese neighbours, local tradespeople, and community members who provided practical advice, information, and assistance. Learning the local environment frequently depended on these relationships, particularly in relation to agricultural practices, land management, and navigating administrative processes. The videos suggest that integration into the local rural context was not achieved solely through residence but through gradual participation in existing social networks.

The emergence of digital networks represents another important dimension of the project. Through the YouTube channel, the homestead became connected to a geographically dispersed audience that contributed not only attention but also knowledge, encouragement, and practical support. Viewers frequently provided technical recommendations, shared experiences, and suggested solutions to challenges encountered during the development process. In several instances, participants explicitly invited feedback and advice from their audience, treating the channel as a space of collective learning rather than one-way communication. For example, while installing a new power system, one participant asked viewers:

“How would you glue it to the wood?... Please leave it in the comments” (Video 14, approximately 12:40).

This illustrates how digital platforms functioned not only as communication channels but also as sources of technical knowledge and collaborative problem-solving. The relationship between digital audiences and the homestead occasionally extended beyond knowledge exchange. Some viewers became visitors, supporters, and contributors to specific projects. One video describes assistance provided by supporters travelling from abroad, while others document collaborative activities involving visitors and friends. Such interactions demonstrate how digital communities can generate tangible forms of support that influence the development of place-based initiatives.

At the same time, the videos reveal an emerging diversification of livelihood activities. While the initial focus of the project was the creation of a functional off-grid home, later narratives increasingly incorporated activities associated with education, communication, and community-building. The production of video content became an important component of everyday practice, creating opportunities to share experiences, document learning processes, and connect with wider audiences interested in alternative lifestyles. As one participant explained while documenting daily activities:

“I went to Portuguese lessons and that takes time. And when you come back, sometimes you don’t want to do anything” (Video 14, approximately 11:20).

This reflects how maintaining the lifestyle involved balancing homestead work with other activities that supported longer-term integration and the development of new livelihood opportunities. At the same time, this emerging livelihood strategy also relied on digital platforms and sustained interaction with online audiences, illustrating that reduced dependence on centralized infrastructures did not eliminate reliance on wider socio-technical networks.

Future livelihood aspirations further reflected this relational orientation. This long-term orientation is also reflected in the participants’ plans for the homestead. As one participant explained:

“The plans are probably to make a small workshop in there... We’re going to get a small tractor in the near future” (Video 1, approximately 3:40–4:00).

Discussions concerning vegetable production, local food distribution, orchard management, and potential small-scale business activities indicate that economic value was increasingly imagined through relationships with local consumers and community members rather than through large-scale commercial production. For example, plans to establish vegetable basket deliveries were explicitly linked to the productive potential of neighbouring orchards and gardens, as well as to the desire to strengthen local food networks.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the development of the homestead depended not on isolation but on the formation of multiple social connections operating across local and transnational scales. Off-grid living therefore appears less as a condition of independence and more as a process of constructing new forms of interdependence. The initiative relied upon the exchange of knowledge, labour, resources, and support among diverse

actors, demonstrating that self-reliance and social connectedness are not mutually exclusive but often develop simultaneously.

4.5. Caring for Land, Creating Livelihoods

As the homestead developed, activities increasingly extended beyond the establishment of basic living conditions towards practices focused on land stewardship, ecological restoration, and the creation of new livelihood opportunities. The videos document a gradual shift from infrastructure construction and property rehabilitation towards longer-term concerns regarding biodiversity, landscape management, food production, and the preservation of ecological resources. In this sense, the initiative evolved from a settlement project into an ongoing process of caring for both land and livelihood.

One of the clearest examples of this transition is found in the participants' engagement with neighbouring properties. Rather than focusing exclusively on the boundaries of their own land, the videos reveal growing concern for the condition and future management of surrounding landscapes. In particular, considerable attention was devoted to a neighbouring orchard containing mature olive trees, fruit trees, and cultivated areas that had been maintained for decades. The participants expressed concern that the property might be neglected or degraded if acquired by owners unwilling to continue its care. Reflecting on the orchard's condition, they emphasized that it had been "looked after, flourished, loved for the last 50 years or so" and highlighted its productive and ecological value.

This concern for landscape continuity was accompanied by active efforts to improve and maintain ecological resources. The videos document activities including orchard management, vegetation control, habitat restoration, soil improvement, and the preservation of mature trees. Such practices were frequently justified not only in terms of productivity but also through reference to beauty, biodiversity, and long-term ecological health. The landscape was increasingly portrayed as something to be cared for rather than simply utilized.

Beekeeping provides another illustration of this evolving relationship with the environment. The arrival of the first bee swarm was presented as a significant event within the development of the homestead. Although practical benefits such as pollination and honey production were acknowledged, discussions surrounding the bees often focused on their ecological role and their contribution to the wider health of the landscape. The management of bee colonies encouraged greater attention to flowering plants, seasonal cycles, and the broader ecological conditions necessary to support pollinator populations.

Food production similarly evolved beyond the goal of household self-provisioning. Throughout the videos, participants discussed plans for vegetable cultivation, orchard management, and small-scale food distribution. Future aspirations included the development of vegetable basket schemes and other locally embedded economic activities capable of generating income while remaining closely connected to the productive capacities of the land. These plans were generally framed in terms of quality, sustainability, and community relationships rather than expansion or commercial growth.

An important feature of these emerging livelihood practices was the integration of material and non-material forms of value creation. Alongside food production and land management, the initiative increasingly generated value through education, storytelling, and knowledge sharing. The YouTube channel became a platform through which practical experiences, successes, failures, and lessons learned were communicated to a broader audience. Knowledge itself emerged as an important resource and, potentially, as a livelihood activity linked to the homestead.

The findings further suggest that economic activities were increasingly shaped by ecological considerations. Decisions concerning future production, land acquisition, and infrastructure development were repeatedly evaluated in relation to environmental conditions, available resources, and long-term sustainability. This contrasts with more conventional

models of rural entrepreneurship that prioritize output maximization or rapid growth. Instead, participants frequently expressed preferences for gradual development, manageable scale, and compatibility with the ecological characteristics of the surrounding landscape.

Taken together, these observations indicate that livelihood formation within the initiative ‘Portugal It Is’ cannot be understood solely through conventional economic categories. The development of income-generating activities was closely intertwined with practices of land stewardship, ecological restoration, learning, and community engagement. Caring for the land was not treated as a separate activity from creating a livelihood; rather, the two increasingly became interconnected aspects of the same developmental process. By the later stages of the project, the homestead functioned not only as a place of residence and production but also as a site where ecological care, knowledge exchange, and livelihood creation were becoming progressively integrated.

5. Discussion

While existing livelihood frameworks primarily explain how individuals and households combine capabilities, assets, and activities to secure a living, socio-ecological re-embedding explains how these livelihoods become reconnected with ecological systems and local communities, and service-dominant logic highlights how value is co-created through resource integration. The concept of *symbiotic livelihoods* builds on these complementary perspectives but focuses on the configuration of everyday livelihood practices through which ecological stewardship, adaptive learning, relational value creation, community embeddedness, and livelihood diversification are enacted simultaneously. In this sense, *symbiotic livelihoods* is proposed as an integrative analytical concept that connects these complementary perspectives at the level of lived practice.

5.1. Beyond Lifestyle Migration: Off-Grid Living as Socio-Ecological Re-Embedding

The findings suggest that the initiative ‘Portugal It Is’ cannot be understood solely through the lens of lifestyle migration. Previous research has frequently interpreted lifestyle migration as a search for improved quality of life, personal fulfilment, and escape from the pressures associated with urban-industrial societies [16,36]. While these motivations were clearly present in the empirical material, the case demonstrates that migration was only the starting point of a broader process involving the reconstruction of everyday relationships with land, food, water, energy, and community.

The transition documented in this study extended beyond geographical relocation. Participants engaged in the gradual development of practical knowledge, ecological awareness, and new livelihood practices rooted in the local environment. In this respect, the findings support arguments within rural studies that migration to rural areas often involves processes of re-embedding within place-based social and ecological systems rather than simply residential relocation [18,37].

The empirical evidence further indicates that adaptation was not achieved through the implementation of a predefined lifestyle model. Instead, participants continuously adjusted their practices in response to environmental conditions, resource constraints, and learning experiences. This finding aligns with research on off-grid living that emphasizes experimentation, improvisation, and practical learning as central features of alternative lifestyle projects [13,15].

Importantly, the case challenges simplistic interpretations of off-grid living as an attempt to withdraw from society. Although autonomy and self-reliance were important aspirations, the findings reveal increasing dependence on social relationships, local knowledge, ecological processes, and digital networks. Rather than reducing interconnectivity, the transition generated new forms of socio-ecological embeddedness. This suggests

that off-grid living may be more accurately understood as a process of reconfiguring relationships than as a project of isolation or independence.

5.2. Understanding the Development Trajectory Through Biomimetic–Organizational Ecology

The developmental trajectory of the initiative ‘Portugal It Is’ closely reflects the adaptive dynamics described within the Biomimetic–Organizational Ecology (BOE) framework. Rather than progressing through a linear sequence of predefined stages, the homestead evolved through continuous interactions between environmental conditions, available resources, technological systems, and social networks. This pattern resembles ecological succession processes in which organisms and ecosystems develop through cycles of establishment, growth, disturbance, adaptation, and renewal.

The initial phase of the project corresponds to what BOE conceptualizes as germination. This stage was characterized by the emergence of a vision for an alternative lifestyle, the search for a suitable location, and the acquisition of land capable of supporting long-term aspirations. Similar to ecological colonization processes, the initiative began with a relatively small set of resources but a strong adaptive potential. At this stage, uncertainty was high and future development pathways remained largely open.

The subsequent period of infrastructure development reflects a process of rooting and network formation. During this phase, participants invested considerable effort in establishing basic systems necessary for habitation and production, including housing, water access, energy infrastructure, and food-growing spaces. Simultaneously, relationships with neighbours, local residents, family members, and digital communities became increasingly important. The findings suggest that successful establishment depended not only on physical infrastructure but also on the gradual accumulation of social and knowledge-based resources.

A phase of canopy expansion became evident as the initiative diversified its activities beyond basic settlement functions. Food production, orchard management, ecological restoration, beekeeping, digital content creation, and knowledge sharing gradually expanded the functional scope of the homestead. Rather than specializing in a single activity, the initiative developed multiple interconnected functions that enhanced its adaptive capacity. This diversification resembles ecological systems in which increased complexity contributes to resilience and stability.

Importantly, the empirical material demonstrates that development was repeatedly shaped by disturbances. Technical failures, construction challenges, financial constraints, climatic conditions, and unforeseen setbacks frequently disrupted planned activities. Conventional development models often treat such disturbances as obstacles to be eliminated. In contrast, the BOE perspective highlights their potential role in stimulating adaptation and innovation. The findings support this interpretation. Many of the improvements documented in the videos, including upgraded energy systems, revised construction approaches, and modified land-management practices, emerged directly from previous failures and limitations.

The final stage observed in the case can be interpreted as a process of regeneration. Regeneration did not signify the completion of the project but rather its increasing capacity for self-renewal and adaptation. Abandoned buildings were restored, neglected landscapes were rehabilitated, practices intended to support ecological functioning became increasingly evident, and livelihood activities became progressively diversified. Importantly, the initiative exhibited regenerative practices across multiple dimensions, including the restoration of physical infrastructure, stewardship of ecological resources, and the development of practical knowledge and social relationships. While these activities are consistent with regenerative principles, the study does not assess ecological outcomes directly.

The findings therefore support the usefulness of BOE as a framework for understanding alternative livelihood initiatives. Rather than viewing off-grid projects as static examples of self-sufficiency, the framework highlights their dynamic and evolutionary character. The ‘Portugal It Is’ case demonstrates how adaptive capacity emerges through continuous interaction between people, technologies, communities, and ecological systems. From this perspective, resilience is not achieved through stability or independence but through the ability to learn, diversify, and regenerate in response to changing conditions.

5.3. From Self-Sufficiency to Symbiotic Livelihoods

Much of the literature on off-grid living emphasizes autonomy, independence, and self-sufficiency as defining characteristics of alternative lifestyles [13,15]. These themes were also present in the ‘Portugal It Is’ case. Participants repeatedly expressed a desire to reduce dependence on centralized infrastructures and gain greater control over housing, food, water, and energy systems. However, the findings indicate that the development of the initiative cannot be adequately explained through the concept of self-sufficiency alone.

Rather than becoming increasingly independent, the homestead evolved through the formation of multiple relationships connecting people, technologies, ecosystems, and communities. Practical knowledge was acquired through interactions with neighbours, family members, friends, and online audiences. Infrastructure development depended upon collaboration and external expertise. Food production relied on ecological processes such as soil formation, pollination, seasonal cycles, and water availability. Even digital content creation, which emerged as an important component of the livelihood strategy, depended upon sustained engagement with a wider community of viewers and supporters.

These findings suggest that the transition documented in this study involved not a reduction in interdependence but its reconfiguration. Dependencies on centralized systems were partially replaced by more localized and relational forms of exchange involving social networks, ecological processes, and community-based knowledge. The resulting livelihood system remained highly interconnected, although the nature of those connections differed from those typically associated with conventional economic arrangements.

This observation resonates with service-dominant logic, which conceptualizes value as co-created through interactions among multiple actors rather than produced by isolated individuals or organizations [38,39]. Within the initiative ‘Portugal It Is’, value emerged not only through material production but also through education, storytelling, knowledge sharing, community engagement, and ecological stewardship. The YouTube channel itself illustrates this process, functioning simultaneously as a communication platform, learning environment, community-building mechanism, and potential source of economic support.

To capture these dynamics, the concept of symbiotic livelihoods may offer a useful analytical perspective. In this study, symbiotic livelihoods refer to livelihood arrangements that generate social, ecological, and economic value through mutually reinforcing relationships among people, communities, technologies, and ecosystems. The concept shifts attention away from individual self-sufficiency and towards the quality of relationships through which livelihood systems are sustained and reproduced.

Several characteristics of symbiotic livelihoods are evident in the case. First, livelihood activities were closely linked to ecological stewardship, including orchard restoration, habitat management, pollinator support, and the maintenance of productive landscapes. Second, value creation frequently occurred through relational processes such as knowledge exchange, collaboration, and community engagement. Third, adaptive learning played a central role, with participants continuously modifying practices in response to ecological feedback and practical experience. Finally, the initiative combined multiple forms of value creation, integrating material production with educational, cultural, and communicative activities.

At the same time, the findings caution against idealized interpretations. The initiative remained dependent on external markets, digital platforms, purchased technologies, and broader economic systems. Consequently, symbiotic livelihoods should not be understood as complete alternatives to contemporary economic structures. Rather, they represent hybrid arrangements in which elements of autonomy, market participation, ecological stewardship, and social cooperation coexist in dynamic and sometimes contradictory ways.

Viewed from this perspective, the initiative ‘Portugal It Is’ demonstrates how off-grid living can function as a space for experimenting with alternative forms of livelihood organization. The case suggests that the significance of such initiatives may lie less in achieving complete self-sufficiency and more in exploring new ways of integrating economic activity, ecological care, and social relationships within everyday life.

5.4. Off-Grid Lifestyles as Laboratories of the Symbiocene

Before discussing the implications of the findings for Symbiocene theory, Table 2 summarizes the principal Symbiocene-related characteristics identified in the case.

Table 2. Dimensions of symbiotic livelihoods and illustrative empirical evidence from the initiative ‘Portugal It Is’.

Dimension of Symbiotic Livelihoods	Illustrative Evidence
Ecological stewardship	Orchard restoration, habitat management, preservation of mature trees, beekeeping (Section 4.2; Videos 13–14)
Restoration-oriented practices	Rehabilitation of abandoned land and buildings; landscape restoration activities intended to improve local ecological conditions (Sections 4.2 and 4.5; Videos 11–14)
Human–nature reciprocity	Adaptation of practices to local ecological conditions and environmental feedback (Section 4.2; Videos 1, 13–14)
Relational value creation	Knowledge sharing, education, digital storytelling, and community engagement (Section 4.4; Videos 12, 14–15)
Adaptive learning	Continuous experimentation and adjustment of practices in response to changing conditions (Sections 4.2 and 4.3; Videos 1–2, 5, 8, 12)
Community embeddedness	Collaboration with neighbours, local residents, supporters, and online audiences (Section 4.4; Videos 1, 12, 14–15)
Diversified livelihoods	Integration of food production, ecological stewardship, and digital entrepreneurship (Sections 4.4 and 4.5; Videos 10, 14–15)
Reduced dependence on centralized systems	Renewable energy use, self-provisioning, and local resource utilization (Sections 4.3–4.5; Videos 8, 10–12)
Ongoing tensions and limitations	Continued reliance on markets, technologies, and external infrastructures (Sections 4.3 and 5.3; Videos 8, 12, 14)

Source: aggregated by authors.

The concept of the Symbiocene, introduced by [11], proposes a societal transition beyond sustainability towards modes of living grounded in mutualism, ecological reciprocity, and co-evolutionary relationships between humans and the more-than-human world. While the Symbiocene is often discussed as a normative vision of a desirable future, empirical studies examining how its principles may emerge in everyday practice remain limited. The findings of this study suggest that off-grid lifestyle initiatives may provide valuable empirical contexts for exploring such possibilities.

The ‘Portugal It Is’ case does not represent a complete realization of Symbiocene principles. Nor does it offer a blueprint for societal transformation. Nevertheless, the initiative

exhibits several characteristics consistent with a Symbiocene-oriented mode of living. These include ecological stewardship, restoration of degraded resources, adaptive learning, attention to biodiversity, and the development of livelihood practices that integrate economic activity with environmental care.

A particularly important observation concerns the evolving relationship between people and place. The empirical material demonstrates a gradual shift from viewing land primarily as a resource base towards understanding it as a living system requiring continuous care, observation, and reciprocal engagement. Activities such as orchard restoration, habitat maintenance, pollinator support, and landscape stewardship reflect an orientation that extends beyond resource extraction or production efficiency. Instead, they suggest an emerging awareness of human well-being as being closely connected to the health and vitality of surrounding ecosystems.

The findings also indicate that value creation increasingly occurred through relational rather than purely extractive processes. Educational activities, knowledge sharing, community engagement, and digital storytelling became important components of the livelihood system. These activities generated value not primarily through the extraction of material resources but through the cultivation and circulation of knowledge, experience, and social connections. Such practices resonate with broader Symbiocene arguments emphasizing cooperation, creativity, and mutual benefit as foundations for future socio-economic systems [11].

At the same time, the study highlights the importance of maintaining a critical perspective. The initiative remained embedded within wider technological, economic, and institutional structures. Solar panels, digital platforms, construction materials, and market exchanges all played important roles in enabling the development of the homestead. Consequently, the case should not be interpreted as evidence of complete independence from industrial systems or as a fully autonomous socio-ecological alternative. Rather, it represents a hybrid arrangement in which elements of conventional and alternative systems coexist.

This observation is important because it suggests that transitions towards more symbiotic forms of living are unlikely to occur through complete separation from existing institutions. Instead, they may emerge through gradual experimentation, adaptation, and reconfiguration of relationships within existing socio-economic contexts. In this regard, off-grid initiatives can be understood as experimental niches in which alternative configurations of human–nature–economy relationships are explored and tested in practice.

The concept of “lifestyles as laboratories” offers a useful way of interpreting these dynamics. Similar to niche innovations discussed in sustainability transitions research [20,23], off-grid homesteads create protected spaces in which alternative practices, values, and livelihood arrangements can develop. Their significance may therefore extend beyond their immediate local impacts. By demonstrating the practical possibilities and limitations of different socio-ecological arrangements, such initiatives can be understood as potential sites of experimentation and learning regarding future pathways of sustainability and regeneration. However, the present study does not examine how these practices are interpreted, adopted, or diffused beyond the case itself.

From this perspective, the initiative ‘Portugal It Is’ may be understood not as an example of the Symbiocene itself but as a small-scale site of experimentation with symbiotic living. The case illustrates how ecological stewardship, adaptive learning, community engagement, and diversified livelihood practices can become increasingly integrated within everyday life. These developments provide empirical support for the proposition that off-grid lifestyles may function as laboratories in which elements of a more regenerative and relational socio-ecological future are being actively explored.

5.5. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is based on a single qualitative case and therefore does not permit statistical generalization. The findings should be interpreted as analytically informative rather than representative of off-grid initiatives more broadly. Second, much of the empirical material was derived from publicly available video narratives that were produced by the participants themselves. Such materials inevitably involve processes of self-presentation and selective storytelling that may not fully capture everyday realities or less visible challenges.

Third, although the analysis was supplemented by field observations and informal research conversations, the study did not include systematic interviews with a broader range of actors, including neighbours, local community members, or other off-grid practitioners. Future research could benefit from comparative multi-case designs incorporating diverse forms of qualitative evidence and examining different geographical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts.

The transferability of the findings should also be considered in light of the enabling conditions that shaped this case. The initiative benefited from access to rural land, financial investment, renewable-energy technologies, digital communication platforms, and support from personal and technical networks. These conditions may not be equally available in other contexts and are therefore likely to influence how similar livelihood trajectories develop elsewhere.

Further research is also needed to explore the concept of symbiotic livelihoods in greater depth. Comparative studies could investigate whether similar patterns emerge across other off-grid communities, eco-villages, regenerative farms, and lifestyle migration initiatives. Particular attention should be devoted to understanding the conditions under which ecological stewardship, relational value creation, and livelihood diversification reinforce one another, as well as the tensions and trade-offs that may arise in practice.

Finally, future studies could examine how audiences, communities, and other practitioners interpret, adapt, and diffuse practices emerging from small-scale socio-ecological experiments. Such research would help clarify whether initiatives like ‘Portugal It Is’ remain localized niche developments or whether they contribute more broadly to sustainability transitions through processes of learning, adaptation, and diffusion.

6. Conclusions

This study examined the initiative ‘Portugal It Is’ as an exploratory case of off-grid lifestyle migration and investigated its relevance for understanding emerging socio-ecological forms of living. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of longitudinal video narratives, field observations, and contextual research conversations, the study explored how Lithuanian emigrants in rural Portugal developed an off-grid homestead through processes of learning, adaptation, ecological stewardship, and livelihood diversification.

The findings indicate that the transition extended beyond a search for autonomy or self-sufficiency. Rather than withdrawing from social and ecological relationships, the participants progressively developed new forms of interdependence involving local communities, digital networks, ecological processes, and place-based knowledge. The homestead evolved through continuous experimentation, adaptation, and regeneration, reflecting patterns consistent with the Biomimetic–Organizational Ecology framework.

The study further demonstrated that livelihood creation was closely intertwined with ecological stewardship. Activities such as orchard restoration, pollinator support, food production, knowledge sharing, and community engagement contributed simultaneously to social, ecological, and economic value creation. These findings suggest that the concept of symbiotic livelihoods may provide a useful lens for understanding emerging livelihood ar-

rangements that integrate environmental care, relational value creation, and adaptive learning.

More broadly, the case contributes to ongoing discussions concerning sustainability transitions and the practical relevance of the Symbiocene. While the initiative ‘Portugal It Is’ cannot be interpreted as a realization of the Symbiocene, it exhibits several characteristics consistent with regenerative and relational approaches of living. The findings therefore support the view that off-grid lifestyle initiatives can function as experimental niches in which alternative human–nature–economy relationships are explored, tested, and refined in everyday practice. This observation aligns with recent research highlighting the role of small-scale socio-ecological experimentation in enabling sustainability transformations and regenerative futures [9].

The paper contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it extends research on lifestyle migration and off-grid living by emphasizing processes of socio-ecological re-embedding rather than individual autonomy alone. Second, it demonstrates the analytical value of the Biomimetic–Organizational Ecology framework for understanding the evolution of alternative livelihood initiatives. Third, it advances the concept of symbiotic livelihoods as a potential bridge between sustainability transitions research and emerging Symbiocene scholarship.

Future research should examine whether similar patterns can be observed across other off-grid communities, regenerative farms, eco-villages, and lifestyle migration initiatives. Comparative studies would help clarify the extent to which symbiotic livelihoods represent isolated experiments or emerging pathways towards more regenerative forms of socio-ecological organization.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, R.L.; methodology, R.L.; validation, R.L. and G.R.; formal analysis, R.L.; investigation, R.L. and G.R.; resources, R.L. and G.R.; data curation, R.L. and G.R.; writing—original draft preparation, R.L.; writing—review and editing, R.L. and G.R.; visualization, R.L.; supervision, R.L.; project administration, R.L. The second author contributed contextual clarification and factual review of the case interpretations but did not independently code the complete video corpus. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data used in this study are derived from publicly available materials published on the ‘Portugal It Is’ YouTube channel. Information regarding the analyzed video corpus is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank Andrius Rulevas for his support during the field visit to the ‘Portugal It Is’ homestead and for sharing practical insights into the development and operation of the initiative. The authors also acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5) during the preparation of this manuscript for language editing, manuscript structuring, and refinement of the academic writing. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, substantially revised, and verified by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: One of the co-authors Giedrė Rulevienė is directly involved in the initiative ‘Portugal It Is’ examined in this study. This involvement provided valuable contextual knowledge and access to the case, while also creating the possibility of interpretive influence. To address this, the analytical process incorporated explicit role differentiation, reflexive discussion, and repeated comparison of interpretations with the empirical material, as described in Section 3.5. The authors declare no financial conflicts of interest.

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