Everyone is busy while nothing is changing

By Lucas Simons

How fragmentation and our project mindset have become the biggest barrier to meaningful change

Across governments, corporates, platforms, civil society, and development institutions, activity around sustainability and transitions has never been higher. New initiatives are launched continuously, funding needs are increasing, coalitions are forming, and progress is documented across reports, dashboards, and global events.

And yet, systems are not transforming at the pace or scale required. We are not short on effort, we are short on impact. This is the uncomfortable reality leaders increasingly face,

And the reason is fragmentation. And it is time we start seeing fragmentation for what it truly is – not a side effect of transition, but the central reason why transitions are so costly and fail to deliver.

Fragmentation: action without alignment

Fragmentation refers to a condition in which a system is divided into multiple disconnected or weakly coordinated parts, resulting in a lack of alignment, coherence, and collective effectiveness. In short, it is not the absence of action. It is action without alignment.

It occurs when multiple actors pursue similar objectives, sustainable value chains, circular systems, decarbonized industries, inclusive economies, but do so through different approaches, standards, metrics, order, timelines, without sufficient coordination or shared direction.

The result is a system where collectively we are mistaking movement for achievement. Where activity is abundant, but coherence is missing. Actors move, but not in the same direction. We build, but not on shared foundations. We optimize, but not for the system as a whole.

At first glance, fragmentation creates the impression of progress. There is visible momentum, a steady stream of initiatives, and a continuous flow of "successful" projects and pilots, supported by compelling narratives and well-crafted impact reporting.

However, when stepping back and observing the system as a whole, a different picture emerges. What we see are isolated pockets of progress, small, well-functioning oases in what remains largely a desert of systemic impact. In such a system, even well-designed interventions struggle to contribute to lasting change.

An engine that consumes lots of energy but does not move

To understand the devastating consequences of fragmentation, it is useful to view a transition as an engine designed to convert energy into motion. The objective of such an engine is simple: to generate the maximum amount of movement and power per unit of energy. In transition terms, this means

converting inputs capital, knowledge, policy, innovation, and effort into maximum sustained forward progress and impact with minimal loss.

In a well-functioning engine, all components are aligned. Each part fits, is connected, well placed, operates at the right speed, and reinforces the others. Energy flows efficiently, friction is minimized, and the system generates momentum.

In a fragmented system, this alignment is absent.

The individual components are active, but they do not fit together. They are built to different specifications, operate at different rhythms, and are often not connected or even work against each other. The system runs and consumes significant energy, but instead of producing motion, it generates vibration, heat, and noise.

This is what fragmentation does to transitions.

We are investing substantial amounts of capital, time, talent, and political will. Yet because these efforts are not aligned, the system fails to convert this energy into impact. It dissipates through friction, duplication, and constant adjustment.

The result is a system that appears dynamic but lacks direction and effectiveness. It vibrates, but it does not advance.

Why fragmentation is fundamentally inefficient

Fragmentation is not merely a coordination problem; it is a structural inefficiency that prevents systems from achieving their goals. Transitions depend on accumulation. Capital investments must build on each other. Policies must reinforce market signals. Innovations must connect to infrastructure and demand. Knowledge must compound over time. Only then can systems scale.

Fragmentation breaks this logic. Instead of accumulation, we see duplication. Instead of reinforcement, contradiction. Instead of scaling, an endless cycle of new pilots and parallel initiatives.

Similar solutions are developed repeatedly, often with minor variations. Standards compete rather than converge, increasing complexity for those expected to implement them. Data is generated but rarely shared or reused. Policies are designed in parallel, sometimes reinforcing, but often contradicting each other.

Each initiative may deliver results within its own scope, but at system level these results do not add up.

This leads to rising costs and increasing complexity across the system. For businesses, governments, and end-users, navigating the landscape becomes more difficult. For investors, uncertainty increases, slowing capital allocation. For innovators, pathways to scale remain unclear.

Most critically, solutions remain trapped in pilot phases. Public and private resources are continuously invested, yet the system struggles to move beyond experimentation.

Transitions stall not because solutions are missing, but because the system is not organized to scale them as it cannot move beyond the project and pilot phase.

The illusion of progress: why more innovation is not the answer

When progress stalls, the instinctive response is to call for more innovation: more pilots, more technologies, more initiatives. The implicit assumption is that previous efforts were insufficient, and that the next breakthrough will unlock the system.

In a fragmented system, this response is not only ineffective, but also often counterproductive. We are trying to change the system one project at a time.

Each new initiative introduces additional complexity into an already misaligned system, more standards, more tools, more solutions, more approaches, without mechanisms to integrate them. The result is a growing layer of unaligned activity that signals progress, while increasing fragmentation underneath.

This creates what can be described as noise dynamics: a system in which activity expands continuously, but impact does not. Projects rarely fail within their own parameters. They deliver outputs, meet targets, and generate positive results. However, they also rarely scale or contribute to systemic change.

Instead, they reinforce a persistent belief that the next project, the next innovation, or the next technology will finally deliver transformation. Without alignment, it will not.

Innovation in a fragmented system adds to the noise rather than resolving it.

Different forms of fragmentation: a system-wide pattern

Fragmentation is not confined to a single dimension; it is systemic and manifests across multiple, interconnected layers. We can recognize five different forms of fragmentation.

- At the solution level, it appears as a proliferation of pilots and initiatives that demonstrate potential but remain disconnected from pathways to scale. The pattern is consistent: pilots rarely fail, they hardly scale, and they never transform the system.
- At the market level, fragmentation is visible in the multiplication of standards, frameworks, and competing approaches without shared definitions or aligned incentives, creating confusion and slowing adoption.
- At the policy level, fragmentation emerges through inconsistent or conflicting regulations across institutions and regions, often driven by siloed decision-making within and between public bodies. This undermines the clarity and predictability required for markets to function.
- At the knowledge level, insights exist but remain scattered. Mechanisms to share, validate, and scale learning are weak, leading to repeated efforts and limited cumulative progress.
- At the stakeholder level, fragmentation reflects misalignment between governments, businesses, NGOs, and financiers, each operating with different incentives, timelines, and narratives.

These forms of fragmentation reinforce each other, creating a system that is structurally unable to deliver large-scale change.

Why fragmentation persists: because it serves our needs

If fragmentation is so clearly inefficient, why does it persist?

Because, in a perverse way, it serves the needs of the system and the actors within it, at least in the short term.

Projects and pilots are convenient. They can be clearly defined, scoped, funded, and delivered within limited timeframes. They produce tangible outputs and measurable results, allowing organizations to demonstrate action, justify budgets, and manage risk. They also are attractive, exciting and fresh, still bearing the naïve idea that this time it will be different.

For policymakers, projects align with political cycles and provide visible progress. For donors, they offer measurable outcomes and reporting clarity. For corporates, they enable differentiation and control over proprietary approaches. For consultants, researchers, and civil society organizations, they form the backbone of business models and revenue streams. This has led to the emergence of a broader project economy, an ecosystem in which careers, organizations, and incentives are built around continuously generating new initiatives. The system sustains itself by promising that the next project will deliver the breakthrough that previous ones did not.

At the same time, incentives actively reinforce fragmentation. Donors prioritize innovation over alignment because experimentation is easier to fund and report than system change. Corporates invest in proprietary standards because differentiation creates competitive advantage.

Beneath this lies a deeper structural issue. Most organizations are not designed to be responsible for systems or outcomes as a whole. Policymaking happens in silos, as institutions are structured around specific mandates, with accountability focused on parts—projects, portfolios, and programs. Fragmentation is not a deviation from this model; it is a direct consequence of it.System alignment on the other hand does not.

From a systems perspective, this reflects a classic collective action problem: individually rational decisions produce collectively suboptimal outcomes.

Alignment, by contrast, is demanding. It requires shared vision, coordination across actors, compromise, role clarity, and the willingness to relinquish control. It requires continuous engagement, joint accountability, learning, and adaptation. It challenges existing power structures and established ways of working. Fragmentation persists not because it is effective, but because it is convenient and aligned with how the system is organized.

Fragmentation as a necessary phase—and as a trap

Fragmentation is not inherently negative. In early stages of a transition, it plays a critical role by enabling experimentation, diversity of approaches, and the discovery of viable solutions. It is the divergent phase, where systems explore alternatives and new pathways.

However, transitions do not end in this phase. As systems mature, the challenge shifts from exploration to scaling. This requires convergence, the process of aligning around shared direction, standards, and approaches.

When fragmentation persists beyond this point, it becomes a trap. Complexity increases, costs rise, and the system struggles to align around effective solutions.

Many transitions today are caught in this position: too advanced for experimentation to be sufficient, yet too fragmented to scale.

From fragmentation to transformation

Transitions do not fail because of a lack of ideas, ambition, or resources. They fail because of a lack of coherence, the inability to align efforts into a system that scales and delivers.

Moving forward requires a fundamental shift in how transitions are approached. Progress will not come from more isolated initiatives, but from creating the conditions under which efforts converge. This means aligning actors around a shared direction, harmonizing standards, connecting solutions, and designing systems that enable scaling. It requires system thinking, transition management, and the ability to understand when to diverge and innovate, and when to converge, choose, align and scale. It requires building ecosystems that are designed not just for experimentation, but for scale.

When done well, the benefits are significant: faster progress, lower costs, clearer markets, stronger investment signals, and transitions that actually deliver on their promise. If we fail, we will keep fueling an engine that produces heat, noise, and vibration, but no movement**.**

The question for transition leaders is therefore not how much they are doing, but whether what they are doing contributes to a system that can actually move.

At NewForesight, this is the focus of our work. Through our TransMission approach, we help leaders understand where their system is stuck, align stakeholders around a shared pathway, and design market driven conditions required to scale what works.

Are you building a transition or contributing to the noise?

About NewForesight

We help you stay ahead by bending the curves on the transitions that matter most. NewForesight works with leaders to turn complexity into clear strategies across food, energy, circularity, inclusive economies, and health, reducing risk, unlocking long-term value, and delivering lasting impact.