The draft of the New Urban Agenda contains a rich set of ideas covering very diverse themes. However, it lacks a conceptual framework that coherently organizes these ideas into a holistic urban development aspiration. A holistic urban development aspiration would inextricably link to the SDGs and express the paradigm that urbanization is the phenomenon through which the Sendai Framework, the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement can be implemented.

A city or human settlement is a system of systems: human and natural, biocomplex and adaptive. Therefore, good urban planning, design and governance will need to be informed by systems thinking or a systems approach and by a new paradigm of urban design that applies systems thinking and geospatial information and analysis, to design built environments that are place-based and in harmony with Nature. We call for highlighting this point in the Quito Declaration and the Quito Implementation Plan.

Geographic information systems (GIS) and geospatial information technologies can give people the power to participate and collaborate in co-designing their environments. The principle of subsidiarity in the zero draft is limited to the narrow concept of “vertical” subsidiarity and overlooks the concept of “horizontal” subsidiarity. Horizontal subsidiarity empowers people at the local level to co-create and co-deliver solutions to urban challenges in collaborative governance. The phrasing “principles of subsidiarity, both vertical and horizontal,” could be used in the New Urban Agenda.

We also call for strengthening the language on science, technology and innovation (STI). In particular, we ask for language to encourage the development of robust science-policy interfaces at the national and subnational levels, to translate research into good urban policy. We also ask for language to ensure that STI policies support the achievement of the agenda, including scientific and technological roadmaps to confront our great urban challenges. Certainly, international cooperation in capacity development in this area will be necessary.