

The 12th World Free Zones Organization (World FZO) World Congress 2026

Panama City, Panama | 12–14 May 2026

Free Zones in the new global operating model

Challenges and Opportunities

The 21st-century economic landscape is being transformed by rapid technological change, shifting geopolitical dynamics, and pressing sustainability imperatives. Global trade is shifting from a long era of liberalization and hyper-globalization to a more **multipolar, security-aware, digitally mediated** system. This transition is fostering negative public sentiment toward trade, driven by detrimental distribution impact, security concerns, climate policy frictions, and shifting industrial policy. If unmanaged, these dynamics can suppress investment, fragment markets, and slow productivity. Free Zones and Special Economic Zones (SEZs) can act as **economic stabilizers and innovation sandboxes** in this transition.

Congress Vision

The 12th World Free Zones Organization (World FZO) World Congress 2026 will convene global leaders, policymakers, free zone executives, and investors to explore the new frontiers of trade, innovation, public policy, and sustainable infrastructure development.

Building upon **the success of World Congress 2025 in Hainan-China**, the World Congress 2026 positions **Panama as a global platform for transformation — the Gateway to the Americas** — this landmark edition will explore how visionary leadership, institutional collaboration, and private enterprise can unlock actionable solutions for free zones to shape the next era of global growth as laboratories of transformation.

Emerging industrial paradigms create opportunities for free zones

- **Knowledge and Innovation Economies**

As intangible assets become the norm, zones must become incubators of R&D ecosystems, startups, and talent to power innovation-led industries

- **Digital and AI-Driven Manufacturing**

Automation, data analytics, and intelligent systems are creating smart manufacturing operations that zones can support with high-end digital backbones

- **Green Industrial Transition**

Circular economy practices, renewable energy, and carbon-neutral operations are now essential drivers of global competitiveness that free zones must be able to offer

- **Regional Value Hubs**

In an era of supply chain reconfiguration, zones have a unique opportunity to serve as anchors for production resilience and regional logistics integration

The World Free Zones Organization has identified growth vectors for free zones

1. **Innovation Catalysts:** Pioneering regulatory sandboxes for technologies such as AI, blockchain, and clean tech
2. **Public-Private Collaboration:** Acting as platforms that connect governments, industries, and academia to co-design modern trade and industrial policies
3. **Sustainability Leadership:** Embedding ESG frameworks into zones operations provide a global reference for responsible industrial growth
4. **Talent and Skills Development:** Establishing continuous learning ecosystems to help build a digitally skilled and adaptable workforce

There are important challenges ahead that we will discuss in Panama

- **Regulatory Adaptation:** Policies must evolve to address digital trade, data governance, and environmental compliance
- **Investment Competition:** Shifting global capital dynamics mean investor trust drives investment, putting pressure on free zones to stand out
- **Infrastructure Modernization:** Integration of digital, energy, and physical infrastructure is critical to supporting next-generation industrial clusters
- **Inclusive Growth:** Free zones need to ensure and to demonstrate that transformation benefits local communities, SMEs, and regional economies.

These are the strategic elements that we will explore together to find ways for zones to consolidate their unique position and offer high-value solutions to their current and future tenants.

Program Structure / Agenda Overview

Global trade is undergoing a structural transition from pure efficiency-driven globalization to a more resilience-oriented **and regionally anchored model**. Firms are diversifying suppliers and production bases to manage geopolitical and logistical risks, while governments reassert themselves through **industrial policies and strategic subsidies** that reshape competitive advantage. At the same time, services, data, and digital trade are overtaking goods as the main growth drivers, even as divergent standards, security controls, and carbon-related trade measures create new frictions and non-tariff barriers. These shifts raise costs but also open opportunities for regions that can combine resilience, digital integration, and sustainability.

To foster confidence and drive competitiveness, the **WorldFZO will lead a pragmatic agenda** that combines global openness with local values. Key measures include helping to build interoperable trade systems and digital “single windows,” channeling investment into zone-level green infrastructure and data transparency and supporting development of regional skills and mobility pipelines. In this manner, Zones can showcase a new model of **resilient, low-carbon, and socially anchored trade**, leveraging transparency and innovative supply architectures to demonstrate that global trade can be both sustainable and inclusive while prosperous for all involved.

Day 1 – Ministerial roundtables + Executive Leadership Program: The Future of Leadership in Uncertain Times

- **Roundtable of Caribbean Ministers: building regional industrial clusters in the new era**
An exploration of ways to coordinate the region’s shared industrial strengths by addressing current hurdles and unlocking opportunities in joint value chains, innovation hubs, and regional trade promotion. The target outcome will be a set of practical cooperation models and consensus-building to find actionable steps to present in the ministerial communiqué
- **Global Ministerial Conference: New industrial development strategies and free zones**
An examination of how modern free zones combined with evolving industrial strategies can drive growth amid regulatory, logistical, and geopolitical challenges. It will focus on digitalization, green production, and investment attraction, fostering dialogue on best practices and policies for a new generation of resilient, sustainable economic zones.
- **Executive Leadership Program** An exclusive pre-inaugural program for CEOs, ministers, and Zone leaders focused on transformative leadership for an era of disruption and opportunity
 - Designed and conducted by a leading global business school
 - **Lead with Vision and Purpose:** Gain the mindset and models to navigate disruption through an adaptive, purpose-driven leadership masterclass on strategic foresight

- **Master Complexity and Collaboration:** Build agility and emotional intelligence in immersive workshops while exploring geopolitics, trade, and trust in a multipolar world through case studies and simulations.
- **Inspire and Transform:** Capture insights from a world-renowned thought leader and earn certification recognizing your readiness to lead transformative change globally
- **Investor Matchmaking:** Curated B2B sessions to foster partnerships and investment
- **World FZO Board meeting**

Agenda

- Morning
 - Roundtable of Caribbean Ministers
- Afternoon
 - Global Ministerial Conference
 - World FZO Board meeting (private)
- Throughout the day
 - Executive Leadership Program
 - Investor matchmaking sessions

Day 2 – Global Vision & Leadership Dialogues: Policy in Motion

- **Opening Ceremony:** Official inauguration with World FZO leadership and the Government of Panama
- **High-Level Plenary Ministerial and CEO panels:** New dynamics in trade transformation and industrial transition within and around free zones in the new global operating model
- **Signature workshops:** Tackling cutting-edge topics for zones on AI, Green Value Chains, and Public-Private structures
- **Innovation Expo:** Showcasing smart zone models and new zone operating solutions
- **Investor Matchmaking:** Curated B2B sessions to foster partnerships and investment
- **Networking Reception and Event:** Hosted by the World Congress 2026 Organizing Committee along with a dedicated space to deepen connections between attendees and facilitate business meetings

Agenda

- Morning
 - Opening speech
 - Keynote speech
 - 2 panels
- Afternoon
 - 1 panel
 - 3 workshops, running in parallel to allow flexibility for attendees
 - Networking event
- Throughout the day
 - Free Zone Expo
 - Investor matchmaking sessions
 - Networking events

High-Impact Panels

Panel 1: The New Global Operating Model – Leadership in Times of Transformation

In a rapidly changing global landscape marked by economic uncertainty, technological disruption, and shifting societal expectations, leadership is being redefined. *The New Global Operating Model – Leadership in Times of Transformation* will explore how both private and public sector leaders can navigate these complexities to drive sustainable, inclusive, and resilient growth. This high-level discussion will bring together visionary speakers to share strategies for fostering innovation, strengthening cross-sector collaboration, and building adaptive institutions that can thrive amid volatility. The panel aims to uncover new models of leadership that not only respond to transformation but actively shape it—ensuring that industrial progress goes hand in hand with social prosperity and environmental responsibility.

Panel 2: Global Gateways – Redefining the Future of Trade and Connectivity

As global supply chains evolve in the face of AI advances, evolving trade dynamics, and new geopolitical realities, the world's logistics hubs are becoming the nerve centers of economic resilience and connectivity. *Global Gateways – Redefining the Future of Trade and Connectivity* will examine how Zones and their surrounding ecosystems can drive a new era of integrated, efficient, and sustainable global trade. This panel will convene leading experts, policymakers, and industry innovators to discuss how advanced infrastructure, digital trade platforms, and smart logistics are transforming global commerce. Participants will explore strategies to enhance resilience, inclusivity, and competitiveness—positioning Zones as catalysts for a more connected and agile global economy.

Panel 3: Sustainability as a Competitive Edge – The Green Industrial Transition

The global economy is progressing toward a low-carbon future where sustainability will no longer be just a moral imperative—it will become a defining source of competitive advantage. *Sustainability as a Competitive Edge – The Green Industrial Transition* will explore how Zones can serve as innovation laboratories for green transformation, pioneering new models of circular economy and resource efficiency. This session will bring together policymakers, industry leaders, and sustainability experts to discuss practical pathways for reducing emissions, attracting green investment, and fostering climate-smart industries. By leveraging their unique regulatory flexibility and collaborative ecosystems, Zones can accelerate the adoption of sustainable technologies and set the standard for environmentally responsible growth across global value chains.

Signature workshops

- **AI & Industrial Foresight Lab**
Examine the transformative impact of artificial intelligence on industrial processes through interactive roundtables and foresight simulations inspired by Latin American case studies. This lab explores how AI-driven analytics, automation, and predictive modeling are reshaping regional manufacturing, logistics, and supply chains — helping policymakers and industry leaders anticipate the next wave of industrial competitiveness
- **Green Value Chains – From ESG to Real Impact**
Explore how the implementation of ESG principles translates into measurable business impact through case studies and localized value models from across Latin America. Participants will analyze how green initiatives — from renewable energy integration to sustainable sourcing — can strengthen profitability, attract global investors, and position free zones as catalysts of responsible industrial growth
- **Public-Private Collaboration for the Next Industrial Era**
Discover innovative frameworks for collaboration between private enterprise and public institutions in a shifting fiscal and financial landscape. This workshop showcases Latin American examples of joint ventures, infrastructure co-financing, and policy innovation, offering participants live business modelling exercises to design resilient, inclusive partnerships for the industries of tomorrow.

Day 3 – Innovation, Investment & Sustainability

- **Focused Panels:** Deep dives into solutions applicable to each of the three main economic sectors to unlock sustainable prosperity across free zones
- **Signature workshop:** Tackling cooperation between public and private sectors in zones

- **Investor Matchmaking:** Curated B2B sessions to foster partnerships and investment
- **World Congress Awards Ceremony:** Recognizing excellence and innovation in zone development
- **Networking Event:** Dedicated space to deepen connections between attendees and facilitate business meetings
- **Closing Session:** Commitments, takeaways, and the roadmap to **World Congress Dubai (UAE) 2027**
- **World FZO AGM** (members only)

Agenda

- Morning
 - 3 workshops, running in parallel to allow flexibility for attendees
 - 1 panel
 - Awards ceremony
 - Investor matchmaking sessions
 - Networking lunch
- Afternoon
 - World FZO AGM (Members only)

High-Impact Panel

Panel 4: From Supply Chains to Value Networks – Resilience and Regional Integration

In an era of geopolitical realignment and supply chain fragmentation, resilience and regional integration have become essential pillars of sustainable growth. *From Supply Chains to Value Networks – Resilience and Regional Integration* will explore how Zones can evolve from logistics and manufacturing hubs into strategic value networks that anchor regional cooperation and economic strength. The discussion will highlight how Zones can leverage their distinctive legal frameworks, geographic advantages, and investment incentives to build stronger, more agile regional ecosystems. Bringing together policymakers, investors, and industry leaders, this panel will examine how enhanced connectivity and collaboration among Zones can mitigate global disruptions, boost competitiveness, and lay the foundation for a more balanced and interlinked global economy.

Signature workshops

- **Unlocking Value in the Primary Sector – Sustainable Resource-Based Free Zones**
Explore how free zones can drive sustainable growth in agriculture, mining, fisheries, and renewable energy. This workshop focuses on creating value-added supply chains at the source, integrating green technologies, and building export-oriented clusters hand in hand with government partners that balance productivity with environmental stewardship. Attendees will examine different models for attracting investment, ensuring traceability, and leveraging digital tools to modernize resource industries
- **Transforming the Secondary Sector – Manufacturing and Industrial Innovation in Free Zones**
This session examines how free zones can serve as engines of industrial transformation through advanced manufacturing, smart logistics, and circular economy practices. Participants will learn strategies to foster industrial diversification, scaling innovation through Industry 4.0, and aligning infrastructure and regulations with sustainable production standards. Case studies will showcase successful transitions toward high-tech, low-carbon manufacturing ecosystems applicable to Latin American economies and beyond.
- **Expanding the Tertiary Sector – Services, Trade, and the Knowledge Economy**
As global trade and services evolve, free zones are increasingly becoming hubs for finance, technology, logistics, and professional services. This workshop highlights opportunities for developing service-oriented free zones with the right regulatory policies, enabling digital trade, and nurturing innovation ecosystems that attract talent and entrepreneurship. Participants will explore policy frameworks, digital infrastructure, and partnership models that position free zones as leaders in the global knowledge economy.