

12th WORLD CONGRESS

12 - 14 May 2026 Panama City, Panama

Congress Theme

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

1. 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

2. 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

3. 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

4. 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

1. **Regulatory Adaptation:** Policies must evolve to address digital trade, data governance, and environmental compliance
2. **Investment Competition:** Shifting global capital dynamics mean investor trust drives investment, putting pressure on free zones to stand out
3. **Infrastructure Modernization:** Integration of digital, energy, and physical infrastructure is critical to supporting next-generation industrial clusters
4. **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.

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

Agenda

<u>Morning</u>	<u>Afternoon</u>	<u>Throughout the day</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Regional Ministers roundtables	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Global Ministerial ConferenceWorld FZO Board meeting (private)Welcome Reception	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Free Zone ExpoExecutive Leadership ProgramInvestor matchmaking sessions

Regional Ministers Roundtables: 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 a series of ministerial communiqués

1. Caribbean Minister Roundtable

A focus on the particular challenges facing island territories in the Caribbean region, particularly in light of environmental impacts on local economies, capability building opportunities, and specific trade opportunities across physical and intellectual sectors

2. Latin America Minister Roundtable

A similar focus on the unique challenges for free zones operating on the Latin American continent, particularly innovation, digitalization, new trends in international trade and nearshoring, along with key elements to drive foreign investment and competitiveness. Sustainability and energy efficiency will also form core topics alongside the role of public-private partnerships in long-term regulatory policies

3. Mercosur Integration Roundtable: The New Role of Free Zones

A high-level ministerial platform to reposition Mercosur as a unified and competitive logistics and production bloc within the global reconfiguration of value chains and accelerating nearshoring trends. Bringing together ministers, multilateral development banks, free zone authorities, and private-sector leaders, the roundtable is strategically designed to advance policy alignment on free zone interoperability, origin certification, regulatory harmonization, and long-term legal frameworks for foreign investment. Discussions will further address coordinated financing mechanisms for sustainable Industry 4.0 free zones, infrastructure integration through bi-oceanic corridors, and enhanced compliance frameworks to position free zones as secure and transparent trade gateways. Supported by validated regional success models, the session is expected to culminate in a Ministerial Communiqué defining actionable policy direction to transform Mercosur free zones into critical infrastructure for trade integration, investment mobilization, and sustainable economic development across the region.

4. BRICS+ Free Zones Roundtable: Pioneering Next-Gen Operations for Shared Prosperity

A strategic continuation of high-level cooperation initiated during the 2024 Congress and reinforced by the Kazan Declaration of the XVI BRICS Summit. Positioned at the intersection of economic diplomacy, industrial policy, and global trade transformation, the roundtable will bring together governments, investors, SEZ developers, and industry leaders to define coordinated investment frameworks, localized manufacturing, digital and green transition strategies, and multilateral trade mechanisms among BRICS+ economies. Set against a backdrop of geopolitical tariff pressures and a growing shift toward local-currency trade through resilient supply chains, the session aims to generate actionable policy direction on free zone governance, ESG and AI-enabled operational models, intellectual property protection, and public-private collaboration. It is further expected to position Special Economic Zones as critical infrastructure for multipolar growth, South-South cooperation, and next-generation global economic integration.

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 leading global business school representatives
- **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

Welcome Reception

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

Agenda

Morning	Afternoon	Throughout the day
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Opening speeches● Keynote speeches● Two panels	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● One panel● Three breakout sessions● Networking event● Gala Dinner	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Free Zone Expo● Investor matchmaking sessions● Networking events

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 breakouts sessions: 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

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 breakout sessions

- **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 Sustainable 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

Agenda

Morning	Afternoon
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Three parallel workshops● One panel● Awards ceremony● Investor matchmaking sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Networking lunch● World FZO AGM (Members only)

Focused Panels: Deep dives into solutions applicable to each of the three main economic sectors to unlock sustainable prosperity across free zones

Signature breakout sessions: 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)

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 breakout sessions

- **Unlocking Value in Agro-industries – Sustainable Resource-Based Free Zones**

Explore how free zones can drive sustainable growth in agriculture and food security. 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

- **New Organisational Models for Free Zones: “From Zone Authority to Ecosystem Operator”**

Traditional free zone models were built to deliver land, utilities, permits, and tax advantages. But zones competing for advanced industries increasingly need platform capabilities: venture-building, startup-to-scale support, university and lab partnerships, applied R&D, soft-landing programs, and integrated services that reduce time-to-market for investors. This session explores the next generation of zone governance and operating models, including holding-company structures, integrated economic zone authorities, developer-operator models, and public-private ecosystem partnerships—showing what it takes to remain competitive as investors demand speed, skills, innovation, and trusted governance

- **Anchoring Tourism and Culture in the Knowledge Economy**

As global trade and services evolve, free zones are increasingly becoming hubs for finance, technology, and knowledge-based services. This workshop highlights opportunities for developing tourism and culture-based, 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.

Confirmed Speakers and Moderators

The following list reflects the speakers and moderators confirmed as of 10 March 2026. Additional participants are currently being finalized, and more names will be announced as confirmations are received.

- **Dr. Mohammed Alzarooni**, Chairman, World FZO, United Arab Emirates
- **Ahmed Bennis**, Managing Director at Tanger Med Zones and Secretary General at Africa Economic Zones Organization (AEZO), Morocco
- **Angel Alberto Sanchez Chiappetto**, Vice-President, FIATA, Switzerland
- **Angelica Peña**, Executive Director, Chamber of Free Trade Zone Users, Colombia
- **Carlos Wong**, General Director, Coyo Free Zone, Costa Rica
- **Cesare Zingone**, CEO, Zeta Group, Costa Rica
- **Courtney Fingar**, Founder, Fingar Direct Investment, UK
- **Dr. Henry Loewendah**, Founder & CEO, Lion Economics, UK
- **Dr. Paul Kent**, Senior Vice President/Managing Director, Ports and Logistics, Monument Economics Group, USA
- **Eduardo A. Arango**, Vice Minister of Domestic Trade and Industries, Ministry of Commerce and Industries, Panama
- **Esther Corral**, Regional Head for Latin America & the Caribbean, UN Global Compact, Panama
- **Francisco Loscos**, visiting professor, INCAE, Costa Rica
- **Hon Senator Aubyn Hill**, Minister, Minister of Industry, Investment, & Commerce, Jamaica
- **Ivana Fernandes Duarte**, Central America Regional Country Manager, The International Finance Corporation (IFC), Panama
- **James Zhan**, Chief Advisor to the Chairman of the World FZO, Switzerland
- **José T. Contreras**, Executive Vice-President, Latin American Free Zone Investments Dominicana, Dominican Republic
- **Juan Operti**, Managing Director, HEMISTION S.A., Uruguay
- **Juliana Villegas Restrepo**, Director, International Promotion and Business Development, Colombia
- **Julio A. Moltó A.**, Minister, Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MICI), Panama
- **Kelli Dawn Hamilton**, CEO, Jamaica Special Economic Zones Authority, Jamaica
- **Lisandro Ganuza**, Public Affairs Director, Zona Franca Santafesina, Argentina
- **Luisa Napolitano**, Managing Director Colon Free Zone, Panama
- **Martin Ibarra**, President, Araujo Ibarra, Colombia
- **Nan Li**, Director, Division on Investment and Enterprise, UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Switzerland
- **Paul Keely**, Chief Financial Officer, DIEZ, United Arab Emirates
- **Peter Janech**, Coordinator, Innovation, Education and Investments, UN Tourism, Spain
- **Sergio Díaz-Granados**, Executive President, CAF -Development Bank of Latin America, Panama
- **Srikanth Badiga**, Chairman, EPCES, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, India
- **Umberto de Pretto**, Secretary General, IRU, Switzerland
- **Wamkele Mene**, Secretary General, AfCFTA, Ghana

 <https://www.wfzoworldcongress.com/>

 wc2026@worldfzo.org