

CONCEPT NOTE

25 - 27

NOVEMBER 2026

ABIDJAN

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

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**AFRICA
ECONOMIC
ZONES
ORGANIZATION**

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are considered as one of the most widely used instruments in industrial and investment policymaking; in Africa alone, the count is 286 operational SEZs across 47 countries, with the number rising each year as African SEZs models grow and evolve to fit the local context. By concentrating infrastructure, simplifying regulations and offering investors a stable business environment, SEZs can support exports, employment and industrial diversification.

The evidence is equally clear that these benefits are not automatic. Many zones, relying heavily on public financing, perform below expectations; the growth stimulus often fades once the build-up phase passes, and results depend on the wider investment climate, the quality of infrastructure, and links with local and neighboring economies more so than on incentives alone.

In Africa, the records are mixed and the stakes are high. The World Bank's reference study found that African zone programs on the whole underperformed: infrastructure inside zones was better than outside, but integration with national industrial strategies, domestic suppliers and local labor markets remained weak.

However, various research identifies consistent success factors: long-term government commitment, a sound business environment, strategic location, skills and technology upgrading, and strong regional linkages are on the top of the list.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) covers 55 countries, 1.3 billion people, and a combined GDP of US\$3.4 trillion. The World Bank estimates that its full implementation could expand exports by US\$560 billion, mostly due to manufacturing activities. SEZs are therefore expected to anchor industrialization and regional value chains.

At the same time, financing conditions have tightened: the AfDB estimates an annual infrastructure financing gap of US\$68–108 billion, faced with a declining international project finance, which underpins infrastructure investment, by 26%. Amidst a changing and increasingly unsure global context, African countries must work on building robust economic models, federated by Africa SEZs, to bridge the gap and ensure positive outcomes for local economies.

Against this backdrop, the 11th edition of the African SEZs Annual Meeting aims to pave the way for the next generation of African SEZs. Through a technical and operational lense, the Annual Meeting will take stock of the achievements of the last decade and open the discussion towards innovative, sustainable, and holistic financing pathways for African SEZs.

THEME AND RATIONALE

This year's theme builds on previous editions, combining policy dialogue with practical considerations. The "Next Generation of African SEZs: Infrastructure, Investment and Global Value Chains" delves deeper into the supporting mechanisms for the creation of a true African model, finding balance between government funding and private engagement to bridge the gap between the potential of African SEZs and global trends.

The next generation of African SEZs will need to go beyond industrial infrastructure to become integrated platforms for investment and value-chain development. This year's theme will explore how innovative frameworks can support infrastructure development, project financing, sustainable investment all while fostering the integration of African SEZs into regional and global value chains.

KEY FOCUS AREAS

INFRASTRUCTURE

Integrated, specialized zone infrastructure (industrial, logistics, energy and digital); innovative frameworks such as public-private partnerships, concessions and private operators to deliver and maintain operations; and technical and economic feasibility.

INVESTMENT

Financing mechanisms for a holistic investment model beyond reliance on public debt; project finance, blended finance and the role of development finance institutions and banks; and bankable business plans, investor confidence and ethics in finance.

GLOBAL VALUE CHAINS

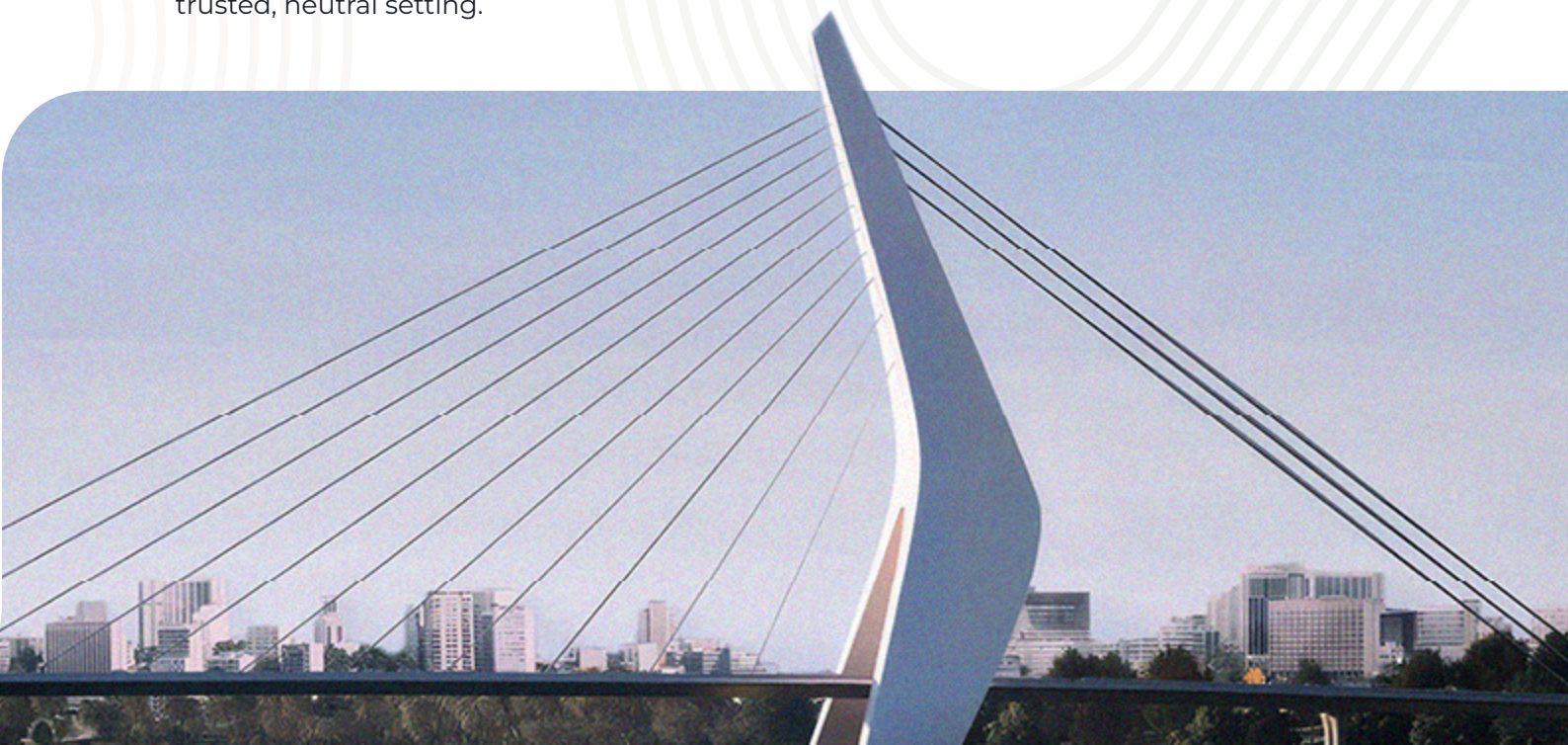
Integration of SEZs into regional and global value chains under the AfCFTA; sector specialization and linkages with local suppliers, ports and corridors; and digital infrastructure as an enabler of competitiveness.

A MEETING FOR PRACTITIONERS AND FINANCING INSTITUTIONS

The meeting is designed as a working platform where those who develop and operate zones meet those who finance them. Its value lies in the quality of the exchange: candid, practice-oriented and grounded in African experience.

SEZ authorities and operators will benchmark practices and lessons from zones at different stages of development, learn from peers who have structured, financed and operated zones across the continent, and access methodologies for feasibility studies, business plans and investment structuring.

Financing institutions and investors will engage directly with the authorities and operators shaping the continent's SEZ pipeline, understand bankability requirements and the priorities of the SEZ ecosystem, and identify partnerships and financing opportunities in a trusted, neutral setting.



AFRICA ECONOMIC ZONES ORGANIZATION: A DECADE OF CAPACITY BUILDING AND PEER LEARNING

Since 2015, AEZO has made capacity building, knowledge sharing and peer-to-peer learning the core of its work.

Ten editions of the Annual Meeting, hosted from Tangier to Luanda, have given its 100 members from 47 countries a trusted space to compare approaches, share success stories and build lasting partnerships. The 2026 edition builds on this record and extends it to the financing community.



2017
2nd EDITION
Dubai, UAE



2015
1st EDITION
Tangier, MOROCCO



2018
3rd EDITION
Abidjan,
COTE D'HIVOIRE



2019
4th EDITION
Addis Abeba,
ETHIOPIA



2020
5th EDITION
Virtual



2022
7th EDITION
Abuja, NIGERIA



2021
6th EDITION
Accra, GHANA



2023
8th EDITION
Tangier, MOROCCO



2024
9th EDITION
Nairobi, KENYA



2025
10th EDITION
Luanda, ANGOLA

STRUCTURE OF THE ANNUAL MEETING

The meeting is held over three days. Each day has a distinct focus, and the three are designed to be followed as a whole.

The detailed program will be shared separately-to be expected; plenary sessions, technical workshops, and site visits for a hands-on experience revolved around the African SEZs community:

25 NOVEMBER

2nd Edition of the African SEZs Training Academy, AEZO General Assembly and Get together event.

26 NOVEMBER

Thematic Sessions and Dialogue.

27 NOVEMBER

Site tour

PARTICIPATION

The meeting is addressed to ministers and public officials, SEZ authorities and operators, development finance institutions and banks, investors, private-sector leaders and international organizations. The 2025 edition in Luanda gathered over 400 participants, including 57 SEZs from 37 countries.

Participants are requested to register via the following link: <https://forms.gle/9SZZAgDcLSJ6qwfN8>

DATES AND VENUE

DATES:

25 – 27 November 2026.

LOCATION:

Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

VENUE:

Radisson Blu Hotel,
Abidjan Airport.



ORGANIZERS AND PARTNERS

EVENT ORGANIZERS



HOST COUNTRY

This year's edition will take place in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, and will be convened and hosted by the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Handicrafts of Côte d'Ivoire and the Industrial Infrastructure Management and Development Company (SOGEDI).



MINISTÈRE DU COMMERCE,
DE L'INDUSTRIE ET DE L'ARTISANAT



PARTNERS

Special thanks to our supporting institutional partners, who have contributed heavily to the organization of this year's edition:

TANGER MED



AUDA-NEPAD
AFRICAN UNION DEVELOPMENT AGENCY



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MINISTÈRE DU COMMERCE,
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AFRICA
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AFRICAN SEZs ANNUAL MEETING 2026

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