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Getting the Lead Out of Mexican Ceramics: The Challenges of Diffusing Safe Technologies to Microenterprises

“Any one of these three communities is potentially a good fit, but we really need the training pilot program to convince as many ceramicists as possible,” Alejandra Montes told her team as she gestured to a map of Mexico.ⁱ Montes was a program director for SafeWork International, a US-based, not-for-profit organization that worked in developing countries to identify and mitigate working conditions that were the sources of widespread health problems.ⁱⁱ In her time at SafeWork International, Montes had been involved in projects aimed at reducing the use of mercury in small-scale gold mining in Peru and ending manual application of methyl bromide in Guatemalan agriculture. By reducing specific, widespread exposures to toxins in the workplace, SafeWork International sought to lower the avoidable burden on strained healthcare systems, adhering to the maxim “Avoidance is the best cure.” Presently, Montes was heading up an effort to address the intractable problem of toxic lead-oxide use in traditional ceramics production in Mexico.

With a pilot training program of her own design, she hoped to demonstrate to potential funders and the Mexican government the possibilities of training ceramicists to use an alternative lead-free glaze technology. The success of the pilot training program—and the broader effort—relied on selecting the right partners and designing the training to best reach vulnerable producers. The Mexican government had recognized the problem of lead exposure, helped finance development of the alternative glaze, and formally prohibited the use of lead-oxide glaze. But efforts to enforce the legal restrictions had turned out to be both ineffective and politically unpopular. SafeWork International saw this as an opportunity to develop an intervention of the type they had deployed with success in other settings: low-tech, attuned to regional and industrial factors, and aimed at the health of the poorest citizens. The Mexican government agreed that a pilot training program would help inform how to mitigate exposure to lead, and whether tutoring ceramicists into compliance could work.

In order to show the viability of a broader program and ensure expanded financial support from the Mexican government and international funding agencies, Montes would need to demonstrate an effective

ⁱ Alejandra Montes is a fictional character.

ⁱⁱ SafeWork International is a fictional but typical entity.

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