

# Lead-Free Mexican Pottery Sells Better

Although Mexican pottery is famous worldwide for its beauty and quality, exports have long been limited by concerns over lead glazes widely used by local artisans. That is now changing, because of new lead-free glazes developed with U.S. assistance.

The lead in pottery posed serious health risks for nearly 500,000 Mexican potters and their families. Weak ceramics markets also hurt potters economically, along with the thousands of material suppliers, shippers, and exporters who are involved in the Mexican ceramics industry.

To develop new technical and market solutions to the lead problem, USAID helped form the Lead-Free Pottery Alliance, working with American Express, UNESCO, the Mexican National Foundation for the Development of Folk Art, and Aid to Artisans.

After a decade of research, Mexican chemists created lead-free glazes that perform as well as the old lead-based formulas in low-temperature kilns. The quality of the pottery remained high.

The challenge for the alliance was twofold: how to educate artisans about the benefits of lead-free glazes and, at the same time, ensure that lead residues are eliminated from pottery workshops.

Through research, the Mexican National Foundation for the Development of Folk Art discovered a cost-effective and simple method of eliminating lead in the kilns of potters. Decontamination will ensure that Mexican potters meet international standards for exportable, food-safe, lead-free ceramics.

With assistance from the USAID Global Development Alliance secretariat,

the American Express Foundation and Aid to Artisans are developing export markets for lead-free pottery, thus providing an economic incentive for artisans to begin using safer lead-free glazes.

Describing this new USAID activity in Mexico, USAID Mission Director Edward Kadunc Jr. said, "We think that Aid to Artisans will create better economic opportunities for Mexican potters—by opening markets and developing products that can compete in global markets.

"At the same time, they'll be helping to promote cleaner operations that will lower health hazards for the potters. Best of all, with the links to the private sector, they will leave in place a program that can continue with Mexican partners over the long term."

USAID's \$1 million contribution to the Lead-Free Alliance is being matched by nearly \$6 million in cash and in-kind assistance from other donors.

- ◆ American Express will give \$75,000 in cash and \$75,000 in in-kind marketing and public relations.
- ◆ Aid to Artisans will guarantee \$1.25 million in sales through its extensive marketing network and will deliver promotion, export services, and business training worth nearly \$450,000.
- ◆ Mexican government agencies will contribute more than \$3 million in technical assistance, intellectual property, and subsidies.
- ◆ UNESCO and universities and labs in Mexico and the United States will provide more than \$750,000 in research and educational outreach. ★

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*Mexican potters are learning about the benefits of lead-free glazes that will reduce health hazards and increase their incomes.*