at the turn of the century, world leaders gathered at the United Nations Millennium Summit and committed their nations to reducing extreme poverty by 2015. They set out an ambitious set of targets, known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were aimed at the many facets of poverty, from hunger and nutrition to education and health, and signed off on by all 192 UN member states. “The MDGs are a pledge,” said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at the Earth Institute’s State of the Planet Conference in March 2010. “They are a commitment to the world’s most vulnerable people.”

Now, five years away from the deadline, where does the world stand in terms of achieving the MDGs? According to the 2009 MDG report released by the United Nations, there has been progress, but not enough. The world’s economic challenges and the growing effects of climate change pose additional hurdles to overcome. “The global community cannot turn its back on the poor and the vulnerable,” wrote Ban Ki-moon in the report’s introduction. “We must strengthen global cooperation and solidarity, and redouble our efforts. … Nothing less than the viability of our planet and the future of humanity are at stake.”

The Millennium Villages project, a partnership between the Earth Institute, the United Nations Development Programme and Millennium Promise, is focused on achieving results in select villages across sub-Saharan Africa and demonstrating that by fighting poverty at the village level through community-led development, rural Africa can achieve the MDGs and escape extreme poverty. A midterm report, released this year with leadership from the Earth Institute, describes exciting progress in the first three years of the project as well as some of the challenges faced and priorities needed to reach the MDGs by 2015. “We’ve seen very promising results from the ‘quick wins,’ namely increased agricultural production, improved child nutrition, distribution of insecticide-treated bed nets and school meals programs,” says Cheryl Palm, a senior research scientist with the Earth Institute’s Tropical Agriculture and Rural Environment Program. “These are all scientifically proven interventions that produce results very quickly.”

The provision of subsidized fertilizer, improved seeds and best practices training has doubled and even tripled crop yields in the villages. As a result, household food security has increased and the degree of stunting in children, a sign of chronic malnutrition, has decreased. The improved yields are being used to feed children daily meals at school, which helps improve attendance. And since the introduction of insecticide-treated bed nets, the prevalence of malaria has declined, helping to improve health. “Once food production is increased, people in the villages can begin to transition to income-generating agricultural opportunities and business development,” says Palm. Other priorities for the next five years will include improving the delivery of health services at the community level, improving education quality, and increasing access to clean drinking water and improved sanitation practices (work that has received support from JM Eagle, the world’s largest manufacturer of plastic pipe).