Radical re-thinking is necessary if we want to sustain early case detection, treatment, prevention of disability, and reduction in the consequences of leprosy including stigma. The call for contributions on sustainability invited papers on novel approaches and examples of good practice covering the whole spectrum of leprosy activities: advocacy, community awareness, diagnosis, treatment, surveillance, reporting and reporting, management of complications, surgical services, prevention of disability, rehabilitation, stigma reduction, education and training, human rights, equity and research through approaches such as co-operation, community participation, partnerships, joint working, and integration. The challenge was to think differently. Trying to provoke papers for this special issue has been hard work as there is a tendency for leprosy programmes to run along rather narrow lines using the same old approaches, almost afraid of radically new approaches. We are grateful to all those who have contributed to the special issue.

The Editorials are innovative and stimulating. Doug Soutar from ILEP emphasises the importance of partnerships. York Lunau from the Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development makes the point that sustainability requires change and innovation, and innovation that is transferable to other health topics. Siân Arulanantham stresses the opportunity of linkage to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the inclusion of leprosy in the specific targets and also within the Neglected Tropical Disease context. The linkages to MDGs is not just on reducing the burden of disease (MDG 6) but also to poverty reduction, education of children, maternal health and partnership working.

Original Papers on sustainability are challenging in terms of producing evidence. Pandey and his colleagues use operational research in nine states across India to assess the level of integration using a number of indicators. A further study from India reviews health care utilisation. The paper from Nigeria focuses on sustainability in community based rehabilitation. Sundar Rao reflects on the changes over the decades in terms of the changing roles of the voluntary sector and government, and stresses the importance of referral systems to sustainability.

Finally, there are a number of contributions describing Country Experiences in different settings, but emphasising different points. Ximenes discusses the key role of local government, while Maria Leide emphasises the importance of indicators to give direction when there may be less leprosy expertise around; Kawuma focuses on quality and how to maintain it; Wang shows that individuals still face discrimination and that voluntary effort can make an important difference in people’s lives. Farrugia’s paper demonstrates the difference that key individuals make to sustaining services.

W. Cairns S. Smith
Guest Editor