Serving in a Multinational Police Mission in Solomon Islands: New Zealand Perspectives

Judy Putt and Sinclair Dinnen

Introduction
More than 500 New Zealand (NZ) police were deployed during the 14-year Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) from 2003 to 2017. They were an integral part of RAMSI’s Participating Police Force (PPF), comprising police from Australia (79%), New Zealand (12%) and 13 Pacific Island countries (18%). This In Brief summarises the findings of an online survey of NZ police who had served in the PPF that was undertaken as an adjunct to a major investigation of the impact of RAMSI on Pacific policing. The larger study draws on interviews and discussions with former members of the PPF’s Pacific Island contingent (PI contingent) and its findings were summarised in an earlier In Brief (Putt et al. 2017). Here we concentrate on the perspectives of NZ police and, in conjunction with the larger study, this research adds to the growing body of literature on transnational police capacity-building and peace operations (Goldsmith and Sheptycki 2007). A fuller report from this survey of NZ police will be published separately.

Main Findings
Of 60 NZ police officers who completed the online survey, the majority were aged between 30 and 50 years old and had many years of policing experience prior to deployment. Although nearly half were women, few of them or their male colleagues reported that they had been concerned by gender issues while deployed. Most survey participants were deployed post-2008, by which time RAMSI’s policing focus had shifted primarily to capacity building of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF). The most common duties while on deployment related to supporting operational policing in Honiara or in the provinces.

Almost all who participated in the survey enjoyed and valued the experience of deployment, with 57 per cent saying it was a ‘very good’ experience and 28 per cent saying it was a ‘good’ experience. Some expressed their eagerness to return to Solomon Islands. Most had been on a single deployment of six or 12 months following a fortnight of pre-deployment training in NZ. The training was viewed as adequate and appropriate, with many officers noting that the most substantial learning occurred on the ground during their deployment.

Many respondents indicated they had learnt a lot from the deployment about capacity development. They emphasised the importance of adopting an approach tailored to the characteristics of the local context, acknowledging the particular challenges facing local police officers in Solomon Islands. Suggested areas for improvement included longer deployments and greater involvement in the pre-deployment training of Solomon Islands officers or others with experience of policing in that country. The principal criticisms that surfaced related to those international police who appeared to have deployed primarily for financial gain, and of what they viewed as the disrespectful attitudes of some individual Australian officers towards members of the PI contingent and the RSIPF. Although many comments revealed a great affection for Solomon Islands, there were also occasional expressions of frustration with local attitudes and police, and, in particular, with ongoing problems in Solomon Islands which they attributed to corruption and circumscribed resources.

Learning Identified by NZ Participants
The first area of learning they identified was how to work within a multinational police mission. They reported good relationships with colleagues, particularly other NZ police and members of the PI contingent. The majority (79%) had stayed in touch with members of other police forces following their deployment, primarily through Facebook and email.

The second area of learning related to their experience as advisors to the RSIPF in an environment that was quite different to what they were used to back home. Although most said that their most important contribution to the mission was their ‘understanding of local culture’ (84%) and ‘community outreach/liaison experience’, the benefits they derived from the deployment included greater tolerance, patience and understanding of cultural diversity and the challenges of ‘third world’
policing. Improvements in practical skills identified by participants included leadership, mentoring and project management.

In terms of applying new learning on their return to NZ, most felt that they had used what they learnt either ‘a lot’ (45%) or ‘a bit’ (47%). Increased confidence, communication and leadership skills deriving from the RAMSI experience helped their work in multicultural communities back home and in their interactions with more junior colleagues.

Few participants believed that NZ Police as a whole had been changed because of the country’s involvement in RAMSI. Many (41%) said they did not know whether there had been change at this organisational level. These results are unsurprising given the small proportion of the NZ Police who deployed.

Comparison with PI Contingent Police
A number of the key results from this survey complimented those from the larger study of former members of the PI contingent police. The latter also indicated that, by and large, deployment was a very positive experience and that many had used what they learnt when they returned home. They also suggested that the PPF management had only an ‘ok’ understanding of Pacific Islands culture, and that there was not much evidence in the case of the larger contributing Pacific Islands police forces of change in their home police organisation as a result of the RAMSI experience. Another similarity between this survey and the larger study was their recommendation to involve more Pacific Islands and Solomon Islands police in pre-deployment training and for greater equity in opportunities for leadership and strategy development among all the contributing police organisations.

The main differences were in what the Pacific Islands police and NZ police claimed to have learnt. Former members of the PI contingent emphasised the police skills and professionalism they had gained, while the NZ police tended to stress the capacity-building skills and approaches they had acquired. Both groups mentioned that the experience had enhanced their confidence as police officers and, in particular, their ability to deal with people and colleagues from diverse backgrounds. A significant minority in both groups focused on the shared values and objectives across different police forces, and expressed pride in their own police organisation. While reintegration was clearly a major issue for many Pacific Islands police in the larger study, this was not covered in the New Zealand survey.

Broader Implications from the Survey Responses
A recurring theme in the survey responses was that a ‘quiet, patient approach’ was required for capacity development. Many emphasised the need for continuing engagement with the RSIPF post-RAMSI, including ongoing visits and training, with widespread concerns about the challenges ahead.

For future combined training and capacity building in the region, the responses highlighted that while Australian, NZ and Pacific Islands police were an effective combination there was a need for:

- greater parity in opportunities and roles, especially for Pacific Islands police
- more focus on specific areas of policing such as anti-corruption and family violence
- development of mentoring programs/models, including the nurturing of individual police mentors
- increased interaction between regional police organisations
- better use of training facilities in Australia and NZ
- greater input from recipient police organisations around training and capacity-building engagements.

For any future international or regional deployments, it was advocated that there be:

- careful selection of personnel to ensure participating police have appropriate cultural sensitivities/knowledge and attitudes
- more targeted engagements with an emphasis on their sustainability — greater attention needs to be given to the organisational and operational realities in the recipient force/country
- more use of specialists rather than generalists.

Notes on Authors
Judy Putt and Sinclair Dinnen are with the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University.

References

Endnote
1. This In Brief does not represent the views of the New Zealand Police.