

Valorisation of CO₂ from biogas plants: circularity in agro-economy

Ilenia Rossetti ^{1,*}, Matteo Tommasi ¹, Simge Naz Degerli ¹, Gianguido Ramis ²

¹ Chemical Plants and Industrial Chemistry Group, Dip. Chimica, Università degli Studi di Milano, CNR-SCITEC and INSTM Unit Milano-Università, via C. Golgi 19, 20133 Milan, Italy;

² Dip. Ing. Chimica, Civile ed Ambientale, Università degli Studi di Genova and INSTM Unit Genova, via all'Opera Pia 15A, 16145 Genoa, Italy

* ilenia.rossetti@unimi.it

Abstract

As methane has been establishing itself as a primary energy source, to obtain it from renewable carbon feedstock rather than to extract it as natural gas is by far more appealing: biomass-generated methane is an efficient power generation mean with a virtually closed CO₂ cycle, accompanying the transition towards a zero-carbon energy future. Biogas however contains large amounts of CO₂, to be at least separated to exploit biomethane, and possibly valorised. A first option is CO₂ hydrogenation to methane, also promising to transform an energy vector that is uneasy to handle (green H₂) into a valuable and worldwide-distributed fuel and feedstock (CH₄). A “power-to-gas” framework could then help to overcome the drawbacks of H₂ as an energy storage medium and to increase the continuity and general availability of different intermittent renewable energy sources. This flexibility offers also additional possibilities for the downstream use of biogas, which may be richer in hydrogen or methane according to the process operation, even if these conditions might not fit the distribution networks nearer to the biomass-treating site.

Different options for the efficient direct conversion of CO₂ and H₂ into CH₄ (Sabatier reaction) are here explored both experimentally and through process design. A key issue is the strong exothermicity of the reaction. Our research explores the use of water vapour, added on purpose to the reactor as a thermal vector and later condensed. The simplest and most economical reactor arrangement is composed of a certain number of adiabatic beds (up to five) with intercooling. Some options propose cooled stages, but they are more expensive. Alternatives may be fluidized-bed reactors that allow better temperature control, but they lead to incomplete conversion and are more difficult to scale-up. The possibility to use the methane already present in biogas as diluent (i.e. thermal vector to control the exothermicity) is also considered, offering the additional advantage to eliminate the otherwise needed and expensive CO₂ capture step.

Another option to valorise the CO₂ recovered from biogas is the transformation into urea, carbonate and bicarbonate through ammonia-based capture. This concept fits a circular view of CO₂ recovery and valorisation returning in the same environment (as fertiliser) this waste product.

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Presenting author:

Academic degree: PhD
First name: Ilenia
Name: Rossetti
Company: Università degli Studi di Milano
Street: Via C. Golgi 19
ZIP code, City: 20133, Milan, Italy
Email: ilenia.rossetti@unimi.it
Phone: +39-0250314059

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