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PROCESS FOR THE PREPARATION OF PROPANEDIOL

The present invention relates to a process for the preparation of propanediol from propylene oxide.

Background of the invention

5 It is well known to convert alkylene oxide into a cyclic alkylene carbonate in the presence of a suitable catalyst. Such processes have been described for example in US-A-4,508,927 and Japanese patent application No. 73022702. These patent specifications describe processes in which an alkylene oxide is reacted with
10 carbon dioxide in the presence of a catalyst containing phosphorus to form the cyclic alkylene carbonate. The catalyst can be an organic phosphonium halide as described in US-A-4,508,927 or an organic trisubstituted phosphine as described in Japanese patent application
15 No. 73022702.

WO-A-03/000641, which is a not-prepublished document, relates in its second aspect to the use of a homogeneous carbonation catalyst in a first carbonation reaction zone and a heterogeneous transesterification catalyst in a
20 second reaction zone for reacting ethylene oxide with carbon dioxide. The carbonation catalysts preferably are alkali metal halides such as KI or quaternary ammonium halides.

US-A-5,847,189 describes processes for hydrolysing
25 cyclic alkylene carbonates to produce a diol and carbon dioxide. Additionally, US-A-5,847,189 describes that it is advantageous to convert cyclic alkylene carbonate with an alcohol into alkylene glycol and a dialkylcarbonate.

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It has now been found that 1,2-propanediol can be prepared from propylene oxide in a more attractive way. The process according to the present invention allows the use of an active heterogeneous catalyst for the hydrolysis and/or transesterification of the propylene carbonate while the process still allows a close integration of the conversion of the propylene oxide into propylene carbonate and the conversion of the propylene carbonate into 1,2-propanediol. Such integration is attractive in that it makes that less equipment is necessary both for the conversion and for the purification of the products obtained.

Summary of the invention

The present invention is based on the surprising finding that the homogeneous phosphorus containing catalyst used for converting propylene oxide with carbon dioxide into propylene carbonate, is not detrimental for the activity of an active heterogeneous catalyst used in converting the propylene carbonate into 1,2-propanediol. This was observed most conspicuously for phosphonium halide catalysts. No deactivation of the heterogeneous catalyst was seen in processes operated for as long as 1000 hours or more. Equally surprising was the fact that no degradation of the homogeneous phosphorus containing catalyst was observed upon contact with the heterogeneous catalyst.

Therefore, the present invention relates to a process for the preparation of 1,2-propanediol from propylene oxide, which process comprises:

(a) contacting propylene oxide with carbon dioxide in the presence of a homogeneous phosphorus containing catalyst to obtain propylene carbonate,

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(b) optionally removing at least part of the carbon dioxide,

(c) adding water and/or an alcohol to the reaction product containing propylene carbonate and phosphorus containing catalyst and contacting the mixture with a heterogeneous catalyst to obtain 1,2-propanediol in combination with dialkylcarbonate and/or carbon dioxide, and

(d) separating 1,2-propanediol from the reaction product obtained.

Detailed description of the invention

In process step (a) of the present invention, the propylene oxide is contacted with carbon dioxide in the presence of a homogeneous phosphorus containing catalyst.

The carbon dioxide can be either pure carbon dioxide or carbon dioxide containing further compounds. Carbon dioxide which is especially suitable for use in the present invention, is carbon dioxide which has been separated off in subsequent steps of the present process. Carbon dioxide can either be separated off directly after the propylene oxide has reacted with carbon dioxide or at a later stage.

Carbon dioxide is produced in the reaction of the propylene carbonate with water. Therefore, it is especially attractive to separate carbon dioxide at a later stage if water is added in step (c). The carbon dioxide separated in such subsequent process steps, can be recycled to step (a) either as such or after having been purified. The extent to which the carbon dioxide is purified depends on the nature and the amounts of contaminants present in the carbon dioxide. These again depend on the exact reaction conditions and purification steps of the process.

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The propylene oxide is reacted with carbon dioxide at operating conditions which are well known to be suitable. Such process conditions will generally comprise a temperature of from 50 to 200 °C, more specifically 100 to 150 °C, and a pressure of at least 5×10^5 N/m², more specifically a pressure of from 5 to 100×10^5 N/m², most specifically of from 10 to 30×10^5 N/m².

The homogeneous catalyst for use in step (a) is well known in the art. The phosphorus will usually not be present in its elemental form in the catalyst. Well known phosphorus containing compounds which are suitable catalysts are phosphonium compounds. The catalyst preferably is a homogeneous phosphonium catalyst, more specifically a phosphonium halide catalyst. It was found especially advantageous to employ a tetraalkylphosphonium halide catalyst, more specifically a tributyl-methyl phosphonium iodide.

The phosphorus containing catalyst can be either added as such or can be formed in-situ.

The phosphorus containing catalyst can be added to the reactor as a solution of the catalyst in an inert solvent such as in a cyclic carbonate. The catalyst can be added either to the propylene oxide or to the carbon dioxide or to the mixture of both. Preferably, the catalyst solution is added to the mixture of propylene oxide and carbon dioxide.

The gist of the present invention resides in the fact that the reaction mixture obtained in step (a) can be used without further purification in the manufacture of 1,2-propanediol. However, some purification of the reaction mixture can be carried out without derogating from the gist of the present invention. A purification which can be advantageous is the removal of at least part

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of the carbon dioxide from the reaction mixture obtained in step (a) before subjecting the remainder of the reaction mixture to step (c). Such purification can substantially reduce the volume of the reaction mixture to be subjected to step (c). Additional or other purifications can also be carried out as long as the majority of the homogeneous phosphorus containing catalyst remains in the reaction mixture subjected to step (c). Advantageous purification steps depend on the actual process conditions and will be obvious to someone skilled in the art. An example would be the separation of unreacted propylene oxide if the conversion levels are very low.

Water and/or an alcohol is added to the reaction product containing propylene carbonate and phosphorus containing catalyst. The alcohol used may comprise one or two alcohol groups. Preferably, the alcohol is non-aromatic and is chosen from the group consisting of C₁-C₅ alkyl alcohols. Preferably, the alcohol is methanol and/or ethanol. Most preferably, the alcohol is methanol.

Either solely water or solely alcohol is preferably added to the reaction product containing propylene carbonate and phosphorus containing catalyst. It is preferred to add water only.

The heterogeneous catalysts for use in the present invention are well known in the art. It is especially advantageous if these compounds can catalyse both the hydrolysis reaction if water is added and the transesterification reaction if alcohol is added. Examples of such catalysts comprise solid inorganic compounds such as alumina, silica-alumina, alumina carrying a copper compound, silica-alumina carrying a copper compound, silica-magnesia, aluminosilicate,

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gallium silicate, zeolites, metal-exchanged zeolites, ammonium-exchanged zeolites, zinc on a support, lanthanum on a support, a mixture of aluminium and magnesium (hydr)oxide and ion-exchange resins.

5 Preferably, the heterogeneous catalyst employed in step (c) is chosen from the group consisting of a mixture of aluminium and magnesium (hydr)oxide, zinc on a support, lanthanum on a support and alumina. These catalysts will be described hereinafter in more detail.

10 The mixture of aluminium and magnesium (hydr)oxide preferably has a magnesium to aluminium molar ratio in the range of from 3 to 50, more preferably of from 4 to 20. In the preparation of the catalyst, generally a so-called mixed magnesium/aluminium hydroxide is formed.
15 However, it might be that under working conditions mixed magnesium/aluminium oxides are present. Our reference to a mixture of aluminium and magnesium (hydr)oxide covers both mixtures of aluminium and magnesium hydroxide and mixtures of aluminium and magnesium oxide and a
20 combination of both mixtures. These mixtures were found to give the highest activity at a molar ratio of more than 3, preferably more than 4. A preferred range was found to be of from 4 to 20, more specifically of from 5 to 15, most specifically of from 5 to 10. Preferred
25 catalysts are described in PCT patent application PCT/EP02/12640 (our TS 1067, not yet published).

30 In another preferred embodiment of the present invention, the catalyst comprises a lanthanum compound on a support. A preferred catalyst comprises at least 7 %wt of lanthanum supported on a support. The lanthanum compound preferably is La_2O_3 or a precursor thereof. Under reaction conditions this lanthanum compound may be temporarily and/or reversibly converted due to the

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reaction conditions into lanthanum hydroxide ($\text{La}(\text{OH})_3$),
lanthanumoxyhydroxide ($\text{LaO}(\text{OH})$) and/or corresponding
alcoholate species such as ($\text{La}(\text{OR})_3$ or $\text{LaO}(\text{OR})$).

As a support for the lanthanum containing catalyst
any suitable support may be used. The support preferably
is substantially inert under the reaction conditions and
is provided with sufficient mechanical strength.
Potential supports comprise clay minerals, inorganic
supports such as Al_2O_3 , SiO_2 , MgO , TiO_2 , ZrO_2 , ZnO and
mixtures thereof. Other examples are a kaolinite, a
hallosyte, a chrysotile, a montmorillonite, a beidellite,
a hectorite, a sauconite, a muscovite, a phlogopite, a
biotite, a hydrotalcite and talc. Particularly preferred
are the inorganic supports selected from the group
consisting of Al_2O_3 , SiO_2 , MgO , TiO_2 , ZrO_2 , ZnO and
mixtures thereof.

The lanthanum containing catalyst comprises
preferably in the range of from 7 to 40 wt.% of lanthanum
based on total amount of catalyst. The lanthanum
containing catalyst may be produced using any suitable
method. A preferred method comprises impregnating a
support with a lanthanum containing salt, and
subsequently drying and calcining the impregnated
support. After impregnation the impregnated support can
be dried and subsequently calcined. Calcination is
generally carried out at a calcination temperature from
between 120 to 700 °C. The catalyst activity can be
increased even further if the catalyst is calcined at a
temperature in the range of from 350 to 600 °C. Preferred
catalysts are described in PCT patent application
PCT/EP02/12638 (our TS 1144, not yet published).

A further catalyst which is especially suitable for
use in step (c) of the present invention is a zinc

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supported catalyst. The support preferably is selected from the group consisting of Al_2O_3 , SiO_2 , MgO , TiO_2 , ZrO_2 , Cr_2O_3 , carbon and mixtures thereof. The zinc supported catalyst can be prepared by impregnation of silica, alumina or mixtures of aluminium and magnesium (hydr)oxide with a zinc nitrate solution. Preferably, the zinc supported catalysts comprise at least 15 %wt of zinc on a support having a surface area of at least $20 \text{ m}^2/\text{g}$, more preferably at least $40 \text{ m}^2/\text{g}$. Preferred catalysts are described in the patent applications claiming priority of European patent application 02256347.2 (our TS 1199, not yet published).

A further catalyst which is preferably used is a catalyst consisting of alumina. Preferably, the alumina is gamma-alumina. Surprisingly, it was found that the alumina catalyst is especially preferred if water is added in step (c), more specifically if only water is added in step (c). Carbon dioxide is released when the propylene carbonate reacts with water and carbon dioxide is well known to cause problems if present with a basic or amphoteric catalyst. Therefore, the constant good performance of the alumina catalyst is unexpected. It was observed that the activity and selectivity of the alumina catalyst remained high even if a substantial amount of carbon dioxide was present such as a carbon dioxide partial pressure of from 5 to $50 \times 10^5 \text{ N/m}^2$, more specifically of from 7 to $40 \times 10^5 \text{ N/m}^2$, most specifically of from 10 to $30 \times 10^5 \text{ N/m}^2$.

If solely water is added to the reaction product containing the propylene carbonate, the process is preferably carried out at a temperature of from 50 to 300°C , preferably of from 80 to 250°C , more

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specifically of from 100 to 200 °C. The pressure can vary widely, and preferably is at most 50×10^5 N/m², more specifically at most 20×10^5 N/m².

5 If solely alcohol, more specifically methanol, is added to the reaction product containing the propylene carbonate, the process is preferably carried out at a temperature of from 50 to 300 °C, more preferably of from 100 to 200 °C. The pressure preferably is of from 1 to 100×10^5 N/m², preferably of from 5 to 60×10^5 N/m²,
10 more specifically of from 20 to 40×10^5 N/m².

The 1,2-propanediol can be separated from the reaction mixture obtained in step (c) in any way known in the art. A further option is to combine steps (c) and (d) by using a catalytic distillation.

15 A preferred separation comprises one or more distillations of the reaction mixture. One or more of the fractions separated will have a high content of 1,2-propanediol. 1,2-Propanediol obtained by distillation will usually be sufficiently pure to use as such. If
20 required, small amounts of by-products can be removed separately. A well known by-product in the manufacture of 1,2-propanediol is dipropylene glycol. The latter can be removed relatively easily by distillation.

25 If an alcohol is added in step (c), a dialkylcarbonate will be present in the reaction product of step (c). In such process in which solely alcohol is added in step (c), the process preferably further comprises separating the dialkylcarbonate from the reaction product in step (d). The dialkylcarbonate can be
30 separated off in any way known to be suitable to someone skilled in the art. Preferably, the dialkylcarbonate is separated in the distillation step(s) by which the 1,2-propanediol is separated off.

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The phosphorus containing catalyst which is present in the crude reaction product of step (c), can be separated off from the reaction mixture obtained in step (c) and/or step (d), at least part of which catalyst can be recycled for use in step (a). The phosphorus containing catalyst can be recycled in combination with further compounds either added to or formed in the process according to the present invention. Preferably, the catalyst will be recycled while being dissolved in 1,2-propanediol.

Surprisingly, it was found that the presence of a solvent can be advantageous in the process according to the present invention. A protic solvent was found to reduce decomposition of the phosphorus containing catalyst. 1,2-Propanediol was found to be an especially advantageous solvent. The solvent is preferably present during the whole process such as in the conversion steps (a) and/or (c) and separation steps (b) and/or (d). However, water and/or alcohol is present in steps (c) and (d) while additionally 1,2-propanediol is either being formed or is present in these steps. Therefore, it generally suffices to add protic solvent, preferably 1,2-propanediol, to step (a). The solvent is then present in the subsequent steps. Most preferably, the protic solvent is combined with the phosphorus containing catalyst before being added to step (a).

The present invention is further illustrated by the following examples. These examples are given for further illustration of the invention and are not limiting the invention.

Example 1

A mixture of water and propylene carbonate was contacted at 150 °C and a carbon dioxide partial pressure

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of $25 \times 10^5 \text{ N/m}^2$ and a flow of carbon dioxide of
0.1 Nl/hour at a weight hourly space velocity of 0.13 g
feed/g catalyst/hour with a catalyst consisting of a
mixture of magnesium and aluminium hydroxide having a
molar ratio of 5 to 1. Further details both of the feed
and of the product obtained are given in Table 1. The
phosphonium catalyst was tributyl-methyl-phosphonium
iodide.

From Table 1, it is clear that a similar conversion
was obtained with feed containing phosphonium catalyst
and feed not containing phosphonium catalyst. The feed
having a lower water to propylene carbonate molar ratio
surprisingly gave a similar conversion even while
containing the phosphonium iodide catalyst.

Tributylphosphine oxide and methyldibutyl phosphine
oxide are formed in the degradation of tributyl-methyl-
phosphonium iodide. The amount of tributylphosphine oxide
was measured in the feed before contact with the
magnesium and aluminium hydroxide catalyst and in the
product after contact with the magnesium and aluminium
hydroxide catalyst. Similar amounts were found. From this
can be concluded that the heterogeneous catalyst does not
degrade the homogeneous, phosphorus containing catalyst.

Example 2

An experiment was carried out which was similar to
Example 1 but in which a higher weight hourly space
velocity was applied.

A mixture of water and propylene carbonate was
contacted at 140°C and a nitrogen pressure of
 $25 \times 10^5 \text{ N/m}^2$ at a weight hourly space velocity of
15 gram feed/gram catalyst/hour at a water to propylene
carbonate molar ratio of 0.36 with a catalyst consisting
of a mixture of magnesium and aluminium hydroxide having

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a molar ratio of 5 to 1. Further details both of the feed and of the product obtained are given in Table 2. The phosphonium catalyst was tributyl-methyl-phosphonium iodide. The feed did not contain 1,2-propanediol.

Table 1

Time on stream (hours)	Feed				Product	
	1,2-propanediol (mmol/h)	propylene carbonate (mmol/h)	water (mmol/h)	molar ratio of water to propylene carbonate	phosphonium catalyst (mmol/h)	Conversion of propylene carbonate (mole %)
100	4.1	4.1	12.2	3	0.21	98
500	4.3	4.3	13.0	3	0.00	96
650	4.3	4.3	8.7	2	0.23	96

Table 2

Time on stream (hours)	Feed				Product	
	propylene carbonate (mmol/h)	water (mmol/h)	molar ratio of water to propylene carbonate	phosphonium catalyst (mmol/h)	Conversion of propylene carbonate (mole %)	Conversion of propylene carbonate (mole %)
110	278	101	0.36	0.88	13	
200	272	99	0.36	0.00	11	
890	276	100	0.36	0.00	12	

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C L A I M S

1. Process for the preparation of 1,2-propanediol from propylene oxide, which process comprises:

(a) contacting propylene oxide with carbon dioxide in the presence of a homogeneous phosphorus containing catalyst to obtain propylene carbonate,

(b) optionally removing at least part of the carbon dioxide,

(c) adding water and/or an alcohol to the reaction product containing propylene carbonate and phosphorus containing catalyst and contacting the mixture with a heterogeneous catalyst to obtain 1,2-propanediol in combination with dimethylcarbonate and/or carbon dioxide, and

(d) separating 1,2-propanediol from the reaction product obtained.

2. Process according to claim 1, in which the homogeneous phosphorus containing catalyst is a tetraalkylphosphonium halide catalyst.

3. Process according to claims 1 and/or 2, in which the heterogeneous catalyst employed in step (c) is chosen from the group consisting of mixture of aluminium and magnesium (hydr)oxide, zinc on a support, lanthanum on a support and alumina.

4. Process according to claim 3, in which the heterogeneous catalyst is a mixture of aluminium and magnesium (hydr)oxide having a magnesium to aluminium molar ratio in the range of from 4 to 20.

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5. Process according to any one of claims 1 to 4, in which process step (d) comprises distillation of the reaction product of step (c).

6. Process according to any one of claims 1 to 5, in which process solely alcohol is added in step (c) and which process further comprises separating the dialkylcarbonate from the reaction product in step (d).

7. Process according to claim 6, in which the alcohol is methanol and in which the dialkylcarbonate is dimethylcarbonate.

8. Process according to any one of claims 1 to 5, in which process solely water is added in step (c) whereby 1,2-propanediol is obtained in combination with carbon dioxide.

9. Process according to any one of claims 1 to 8, in which carbon dioxide is not removed in step (b).

10. Process according to any one of claims 1 to 9, in which process 1,2-propanediol is added to step (a).

11. Process according to any one of claims 1 to 10, in which process the homogenous phosphorus containing catalyst is separated off from the reaction mixture obtained in step (c) and/or (d), at least part of which catalyst is recycled for use in step (a).