CLAIMS:

1. A process for regenerating a silica-supported depleted alkali metal catalyst wherein the level of alkali metal on the depleted catalyst is at least 0.5 mol%, and wherein the silica support is a xerogel comprising the step of:- contacting said silica supported depleted alkali metal catalyst with a solution of a salt of the alkali metal in a solvent system that has a polar organic solvent as the majority component.

2. A process according to claim 1, wherein the surface area of the catalyst is $<180m^2/g$.

3. A process according to claim 1 or 2, wherein the bulk of the surface area of the silica is present in pores of diameter in the range 5-150nm.

4. A process according to any one of claims 1 – 3, wherein the bulk of the pore volume of the silica is provided by pores of diameter in the range 5-150nm.

5. A process according to any preceding claim, wherein the alkali metal is selected from lithium, sodium, potassium, rubidium and caesium.

6. A process according to any preceding claim, wherein the salt of the alkali metal is selected from the group consisting of acetate, propionate, carbonate, hydrogen carbonate, nitrate and hydroxide.

7. A process according to any preceding claim, wherein the depleted alkali metal catalyst includes a second or further metal selected from the group consisting of zirconium, titanium, hafnium, aluminium, boron and magnesium or mixtures thereof.

8. A process according to any preceding claim, wherein the polar organic solvent is an alcohol.

9. The process according to any preceding claim, wherein the solution of the alkali metal salt in the solvent system has a starting pH between 8 and 13.

10. The process according to any preceding claim, wherein water is present in the solution at up to 40% by weight.

11. A process according to any preceding claim, wherein the level of alkali metal salt in solution is <2wt%.

12. A process according to any preceding claim, wherein the increase in alkali metal on the catalyst following the process is in the range 0.25 to 2.0 mol%.

13. The process according to any preceding claim, wherein the concentration of the alkali metal in the solvent system at the start of the impregnation is between 6×10^{-3} and 0.6 $mol.dm^{-3}$ alkali metal in the solution.

14. A process according to any preceding claim, wherein the process is carried out at a temperature of 0-100°C,

15. A process according to any preceding claim, wherein the process is carried out at a pressure of 1-10bara.

16. A process according to any preceding claim, wherein the catalyst is in the form of a fixed bed during contact with the alkali metal solution.

17. A process according to any preceding claim, wherein the flow rates for the alkali metal solution in contact with the catalyst are 0.1 to 10 bed volumes/hr.

18. A process according to any preceding claim, wherein the catalyst is formed into shaped units having maximum and minimum dimensions in the range 1 to 10mm.

19. A process according to any preceding claim, wherein the process is a liquid phase impregnation process.

20. A re-impregnated catalyst prepared by the process of any one of claims 1-19 comprising a silica xerogel support and a catalytic metal selected from an alkali metal in the range 0.5-5 mol % on the catalyst, wherein the surface area of the silica support is $<180 m^2/g$.

21. A process for preparing an ethylenically unsaturated acid or ester comprising contacting an alkanoic acid or ester of the formula $R^1\text{-}CH_2\text{-}COOR^3$, with formaldehyde or a suitable source of formaldehyde of formula I as defined below: