

CURABLE COMPOSITIONS AND MEMBRANES

This invention relates to curable compositions, to their use in the preparation of membranes and to the use of such membranes in ion exchange processes.

Ion exchange membranes are useful in a number of applications, including electrodeionisation (EDI), continuous electrodeionisation (CEDI), electrodialysis (ED), electrodialysis reversal (EDR) and capacitive deionisation used in e.g. flow through capacitors (FTC) for the purification of water, Donnan or diffusion dialysis (DD) for e.g. fluoride removal or the recovery of acids, pervaporation for dehydration of organic solvents, fuel cells, electrolysis (EL) of water or for chlor-alkali production, and reverse electrodialysis (RED) where electricity is generated from two streams differing in salt concentration separated by an ion-permeable membrane.

EDI is a water treatment process wherein ions are removed from aqueous liquids using a membrane and an electrical potential to effect ion transport. It differs from other water purification technologies, such as conventional ion exchange, in that it does not require the use of chemicals such as acids or caustic soda. EDI can be used to produce ultra pure water.

ED and EDR are electrochemical separation processes that remove ions and other charged species from water and other fluids. ED and EDR use small quantities of electricity to transport these species through membranes composed of ion exchange material to create separate purified and concentrated streams. Ions are transferred through the membranes by means of direct current (DC) voltage and are removed from the feed water as the current drives the ions through the membranes to desalinate the process stream. ED and EDR are suitable techniques for producing drinking water. Ion exchange membranes are also used in Zero Liquid Discharge (ZLD) and Zero Discharge Desalination (ZDD).

A membrane electrode assembly (MEA) appears suitable for a variety of applications such as electrolysis, sensors and especially fuel cells.

One of the important problems in the production of ion exchange membranes is how to provide thin membranes with minimal defects. Desirably the membranes have good permselectivity and low electrical resistance. Additionally the membranes are desired to be strong, while at the same time being flexible. Flexibility is required for membranes which are to be wound into tight circumferential structures. The membranes also need to retain their physical integrity over an extended period of time. Desirably the method used to prepare the membranes does not result in excessive curl. It is also desirable for the membranes to be resistant to the chemicals that they can come into contact with,

e.g. resistant to hydrolysis. Low swelling on contact with water can also be useful for membranes intended for use in aqueous environments.

Membrane users require the lowest prices available, which means production processes for the membranes are ideally inexpensive and the membranes should be easily capable of mass production.

US2007/0196721 describes high molecular weight crosslinkable sulfonated copolymers for use in fuel cells.

US3,531,442 and US 4,034,001 describe bis-amide polymers for use in the preparation of fibres, plastics and resins.

The present invention seeks to provide compositions suitable for use in the preparation of membranes, in addition to rapid processes for preparing the membranes and the membranes prepared by the processes.

According to a first aspect of the present invention there is provided a membrane obtainable from curing a composition comprising:

(i) a curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and a sulphonic acid group and having a molecular weight which satisfies the equation:

$$MW < (300 + 300n)$$

wherein:

MW is the molecular weight of the said curable compound; and
n has a value of 1, 2, 3 or 4 and is the number of sulphonic acid groups present in the said curable compound;

and optionally (ii) a curable compound having one ethylenically unsaturated group; wherein the molar fraction of curable compounds comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups, relative to the total number of moles of curable compounds present in the composition, is at least 0.25.

In this specification (including its claims), the verb "comprise" and its conjugations are used in its non-limiting sense to mean that items following the word are included, but items not specifically mentioned are not excluded. In addition, reference to an element by the indefinite article "a" or "an" does not exclude the possibility that more than one of the elements is present, unless the context clearly requires that there be one and only one of the elements. The indefinite article "a" or "an" thus usually mean "at least one". The term "(meth)acrylic" means "methacrylic or acrylic". The term (meth)acrylamide groups means "methacrylamide or acrylamide"

In this specification the molar fraction of curable compounds comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups, relative to the total number of moles of curable compounds present in the composition, is often abbreviated to "MF". MF may be calculated as follows:

$$MF = (M_{\text{poly}} / (M_{\text{total}}))$$

wherein:

M_{poly} is the number of moles of curable compounds comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups present in the composition; and

M_{total} is the total number of moles of curable compounds present in the composition.

For example, a composition comprising 0.3 moles of bis(acryloylamido)-2-methylpropane-2-sulphonic acid (i.e. 0.3 moles of M_{poly}), 0.2 moles of N,N'-methylene bisacrylamide (i.e. a further 0.2 moles of M_{poly}) and 1.1 moles of 2-acryloylamido-2-methylpropanesulfonic acid (i.e. 1.1 moles of a curable compound which does not comprise at least two (meth)acrylic groups) would have an MF of $(0.3 + 0.2) / (0.3 + 0.2 + 1.1) = 0.31$.

As examples of (meth)acrylic groups there may be mentioned acrylic ($\text{H}_2\text{C}=\text{CHCO}-$) and methacrylic ($\text{H}_2\text{C}=\text{C}(\text{CH}_3)\text{CO}-$) groups, especially acrylate ($\text{H}_2\text{C}=\text{CHCO}_2-$), methacrylate ($\text{H}_2\text{C}=\text{C}(\text{CH}_3)\text{CO}_2-$), acrylamide ($\text{H}_2\text{C}=\text{CHCONH}-$) and methacrylamide ($\text{H}_2\text{C}=\text{C}(\text{CH}_3)\text{CONH}-$) groups.

The at least two (meth)acrylic groups may be the identical to each other, different from each other or some may be the same as each other and others different. For example, the at least two (meth)acrylic groups may all be acrylic groups (e.g. all are acrylate groups or all are acrylamide groups and so are identical to each other) or they may comprise one methacrylic group and one acrylic group (i.e. they are different from each other). In another embodiment, the at least two (meth)acrylic groups comprise one or more (meth)acrylate groups and one or more (meth)acrylamide groups, i.e. at least two are different from each other. Further permutations of the (meth)acrylate and (meth)acrylamide groups are also possible.

In one embodiment the at least two (meth)acrylic groups comprise one or two acrylamide groups and in another embodiment the at least two (meth)acrylic groups are all (meth)acrylate groups, especially all acrylate groups.

Component (i) comprises one or more sulphonic acid group(s) which are in the free acid form or, preferably, partially or wholly in salt form. The preferred salts are lithium, ammonium, sodium and potassium salts and mixtures comprising two or more thereof.

Component (i) preferably has two, three or four (meth)acrylic groups, more preferably two, three or four acrylic groups, especially two acrylic groups.

In components (i) and (ii) (when present), the preferred (meth)acrylic groups are acrylic groups because they are more reactive than methacrylic groups and therefore one may obtain a membrane more quickly when using acrylic

groups. Preferred acrylic groups are acrylamide groups because they are particularly stable against hydrolysis.

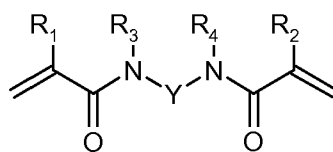
When the composition is free from component (ii) it is possible that component (i) will be the only curable component present in the composition.

5 Under such circumstances MF has a value of 1.

Component (i) may comprise one or more than one curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and a sulphonic acid group.

Curable compounds having a molecular weight which satisfies the equation set out above can provide membranes having particularly good permselectivity and low electrical resistance. Preferably the MW of component (i) is < (200 + 200n), more preferably < (150 + 150n), wherein MW and n are as hereinbefore defined. A low MW is preferred because a higher charge density (ion exchange capacity) can then be achieved in the resultant membrane.

15 The curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and a sulphonic acid group is preferably a compound of the Formula (1):



Formula (1)

wherein:

- 20 R_1 and R_2 are each independently H or methyl;
 R_3 and R_4 are each independently H or alkyl, or R_3 and R_4 together with the N atoms to which they are attached and Y form an optionally substituted 6- or 7-membered ring; and
 Y is an optionally substituted and optionally interrupted
 25 alkylene or arylene group;

provided that the compound of Formula (1) has 1, 2, 3 or 4 sulphonic acid groups; and provided that the compound of Formula (1) has a molecular weight which satisfies the equation:

$$MW < (300 + 300n)$$

30 wherein:

- Mw is the molecular weight of the compound of Formula (1); and
 n has a value of 1, 2, 3 or 4 and is the number of sulphonic acid groups present in the compound of Formula (1).

When R_3 or R_4 is alkyl it is preferably C_{1-4} -alkyl.

35 When R_3 and R_4 together with the N atoms to which they are attached and Y form an optionally substituted 6- or 7-membered ring they preferably form an optionally substituted piperazine, homopiperazine or triazine ring, especially such

a ring having one or more groups selected from sulphonic acid groups and salts thereof.

The optional interruptions which may be present in Y are preferably ether or, more preferably, amino groups.

5 When Y is an optionally substituted alkylene group it is preferably of the formula $C_nH_{2n-m}(SO_3H)_m$ or a salt thereof, wherein n is 3 to 8 (especially 3 to 6) and m is 1 to 4.

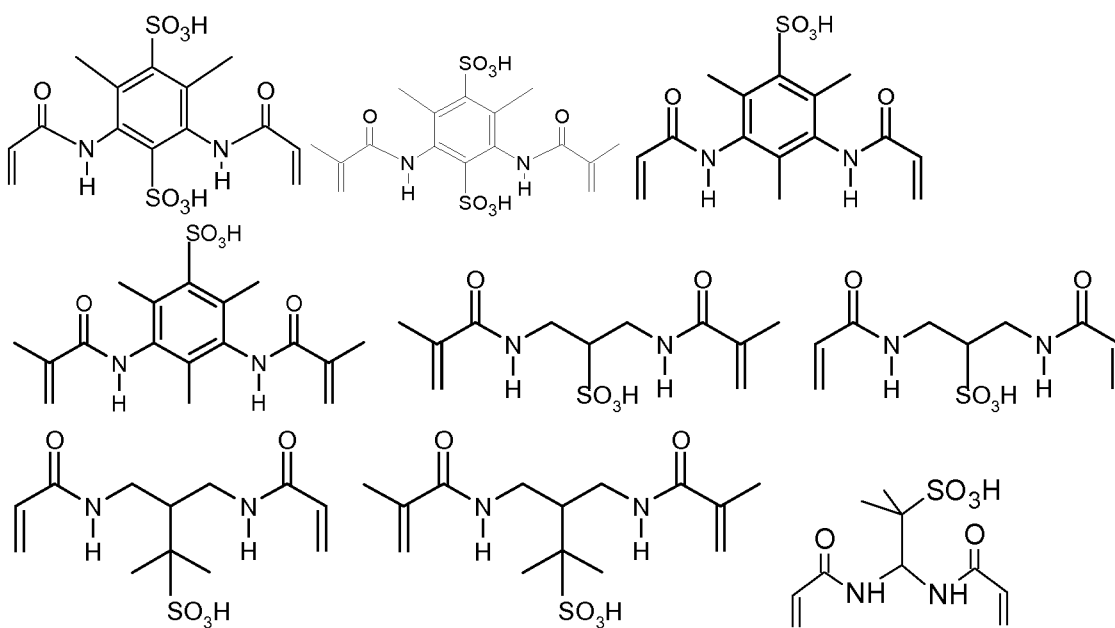
10 When Y is an optionally substituted arylene group it is preferably phenylene having one, two, three or four sulphonic acid substituents and optionally one or more further substituents (e.g. C_{1-4} -alkyl groups).

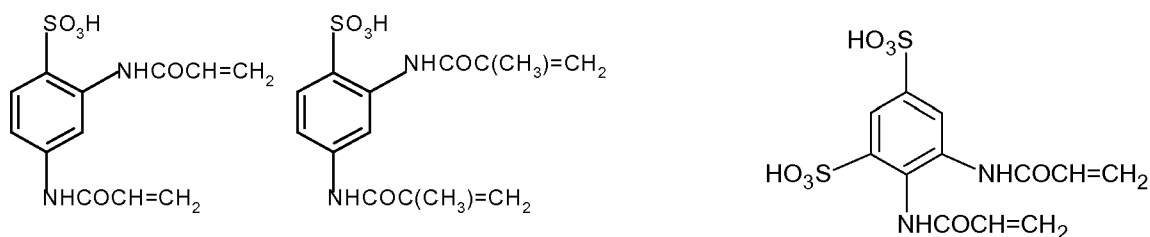
The sulphonic acid group(s) are typically part of the group represented by Y or part of the optionally substituted 6- or 7-membered ring which can be formed from $-R_3-N-Y-N-R_4-$ (wherein Y, R_3 and R_4 are as hereinbefore defined).

15 In one embodiment component (i) consists of one or more than one (e.g. two to five) compounds of Formula (1).

The curable compounds of Formula (1) may be obtained commercially or by any suitable method, for example by condensing an acryloyl halide at pH >8 with a compound having a sulphonic acid group and two or more nucleophilic groups, e.g. hydroxy and/or amino groups.

20 Examples of curable compounds of Formula (1) include the following and salts thereof:





The presence of component (i) in the compositions has the advantage over using conventional curable compounds having at least two (meth)acrylic groups and lacking sulphonic acid groups in that component (i) may be used to prepare membranes without diluting the membrane's ionic charge density or ion exchange capacity.

Component (i) is preferably present in the composition in an amount of 2 to 80 wt%, more preferably 4 to 70 wt% and especially 5 to 68 wt%.

For the avoidance of doubt, except where specified otherwise in the specification, wt% figures are relative to the total weight of the composition (e.g. (weight of component/weight of composition) x 100%).

When the composition comprises both components (i) and (ii), relatively high ratios of components (i):(ii) can be used to achieve a highly crosslinked, low swelling membrane without adversely affecting the membrane's permselectivity and electrical resistance.

Preferably at least 60wt%, more preferably at least 75wt%, especially at least 90wt%, more especially substantially all of the curable components present in the composition carry anionic groups, especially sulphonic acid groups in free acid or salt form.

Preferably the ethylenically unsaturated group present in component (ii) is a (meth)acrylic group. Examples of suitable (meth)acrylic groups are as discussed above in relation to component (i). Preferably the ethylenically unsaturated group is a (meth)acrylamide group because this can result in membranes having particularly good resistance to hydrolysis.

Examples of curable compounds having one ethylenically unsaturated group include (meth)acrylic acid, beta carboxy ethyl acrylate, maleic acid, maleic acid anhydride, vinyl sulphonic acid, phosphonomethylated acrylamide, (2-carboxyethyl)acrylamide, 2-(meth)acrylamido-2-methylpropanesulfonic acid and esters and amides of the foregoing, especially C₁₋₄-alkyl esters, unsubstituted amides and amides having one or two C₁₋₄-alkyl groups. Preferably the curable compound having one ethylenically unsaturated group comprises an acidic group (e.g. a carboxylate or sulphonate group, i.e. it is not an ester or an amide) because such a group can help the resultant membrane to distinguish between ionic species.

Component (ii) may comprise more than one compound, e.g. 1 to 5 compounds. For example, component (ii) optionally comprises a curable compound having one ethylenically unsaturated group and an acidic group and a curable compound having one ethylenically unsaturated group which is free from acidic groups (e.g. it may be one of the aforementioned esters and amides).

Examples of suitable (meth)acrylic groups are discussed above.

The most preferred component (ii) is 2-acrylamido-2-methylpropanesulfonic acid and salts thereof.

Component (ii) can provide the resultant composite membrane with a desirable degree of flexibility, which is particularly useful in applications requiring tightly wound membranes. When component (ii) has an anionic group it also assists the composite membrane in distinguishing between ions of different charges. Preferably component (ii) comprises an anionic group, especially an anionic sulphonic acid group.

Component (ii) is preferably present in the composition in an amount of 1 to 70wt%, more preferably 10 to 60wt%, especially 20 to 50wt%.

Preferably the molar ratio of component (i) to (ii) (when present) is at least 0.05, more preferably at least 0.15, especially at least 0.2, more especially at least 0.25. The molar ratio of component (i) to (ii) may also be at least 0.5, e.g. at least 1.

The total wt% of components (i) + (ii) relative to the total weight of the composition is preferably 30 to 90 wt%, more preferably 40 to 80 wt%, especially 50 to 75 wt%, more especially 58 to 70 wt%, e.g. about 61 wt% or about 65 wt%.

Preferably the composition further comprises a solvent. This is because a solvent can lower the viscosity of the composition and make it more suitable for curing in high-speed, continuous manufacturing processes. The solvent is not curable and instead acts as a non-reactive diluent for the other components of the composition.

Polar solvents, especially aqueous solvents, are preferred because these are particularly good at dissolving the component (i) and any other components having ionic groups. Preferably at least half of the solvent is water, with the balance comprising organic solvent. The organic solvent can be useful for providing a homogenous solution of all the components of the composition. The inclusion of an organic solvent is also useful for reducing the viscosity and/or surface tension of the composition, making the manufacture of membranes easier in some respects. Preferably the solvent comprises at least 60wt% water, more preferably at least 80wt% water.

Preferably the composition comprises 15 to 70wt%, more preferably 20 to 65wt%, especially 25 to 60 wt%, more especially 25 to 45wt% solvent, particularly

25 to 40wt%.

The solvent is preferably water or a mixture comprising water and a water-miscible organic solvent. Due to the presence of a water-miscible organic solvent, water-immiscible solvents may also be tolerated in small amounts such that the overall solvent mixture is miscible.

When the solvent comprises water and an organic solvent the weight ratio of water:organic solvent is preferably between 10:1 and 1:2, more preferably between 4:1 and 1:1 and especially between 3:1 and 2:1.

The organic solvent is optionally a single organic solvent or a combination of two or more organic solvents.

Preferred organic solvents include C₁₋₄-alcohols (e.g. methanol, ethanol and propan-2-ol), diols (e.g. ethylene glycol and propylene glycol), triols (e.g. glycerol), carbonates (e.g. ethylene carbonate, propylene carbonate, dimethyl carbonate, diethyl carbonate, di-*t*-butyl dicarbonate and glycerin carbonate), dimethyl formamide, acetone, N-methyl-2-pyrrolidinone and mixtures comprising two or more thereof. A particularly preferred organic solvent is propan-2-ol.

The optimum solvent content for the curable composition can be determined for each combination by simple experimentation.

Optionally the composition further comprises a curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and being free from sulphonic acid groups. In this specification we refer to such compounds as component (iii). Compounds which may be used as component (iii) include isophoronediacrylamide, N,N'-(1,2-dihydroxyethylene) bis-acrylamide, N,N-methylene-bis-acrylamide, N,N'-ethylenebis(acrylamide), N,N'-propylene bis(meth)acrylamide, N,N'-butylene bis(meth)acrylamide, bis(aminopropyl)methylamine diacrylamide. Particularly preferred compounds which may be used as component (iii) include 1,4-diacryoyl piperazine and 1,4-bis(acryloyl)homopiperazine. Preferably the molecular weight of component (iii) is lower than 500 Dalton, more preferably lower than 250 Dalton.

The composition preferably comprises 0 to 40 wt% of component (iii), more preferably 0 to 30wt%. In one embodiment the composition comprises 2 to 30 wt%, more preferably 5 to 20wt% of component (iii). In another embodiment the composition is free from component (iii). In a further embodiment, the composition comprises up to 50wt% of component (iii) with the proviso that component (iii) comprises an anionic group and is free from sulphonic acid groups.

When component (iii) is free from anionic groups it dilutes the amount of charge which is present in the resultant membrane. In one embodiment it is preferred that the composition is free from such compounds (i.e. curable compounds comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and being free from

anionic groups) or such compounds are present in only small amounts, e.g. in a weight ratio of less than about 50wt%, more preferably less than 30%, especially less than 20% relative to the weight of component (i). In another embodiment component (iii) may be present in a relatively high amount e.g. a higher wt% than that of component (i) but preferably in this situation a high amount of component (ii) is present wherein component (ii) comprises an anionic group.

Components (i) and (iii) (when present) each comprise at least two (meth)acrylic groups and therefore the amount of both are taken into account when determining the value of M_{poly} .

Component (ii) is able to react with component (i) (and component (iii) when present) and can provide the resultant membrane with a desirable degree of flexibility, which is particularly useful in applications requiring tightly wound membranes. When component (ii) has an ionic group, as is preferred, this can also help the membrane to distinguish between ions of different charges.

In one embodiment the composition comprises less than 10wt%, more preferably less than 5wt%, of ethylenically unsaturated compounds other than components (i) and (ii). In a preferred embodiment the composition is free from ethylenically unsaturated compounds other than components (i) and (ii).

Generally component (i) (and component (iii) when present) provide strength to the membrane, while potentially reducing flexibility.

For making a particularly strong membrane it is preferred that MF is at least 0.30, more preferably at least 0.35.

To achieve the desired degree of flexibility, it is preferred that MF is below 0.95, more preferably below 0.85.

Thus to obtain membranes having a valuable balance of flexibility and strength, the composition preferably has an MF of 0.30 to 0.95, more preferably 0.35 to 0.85.

Preferably the composition has a pH of 0 to 11.

The pH of the composition depends to some extent on whether the sulphonic acid group is in the free acid or salt form. When the sulphonic acid group is partly in the free acid form the composition preferably has a pH of 0.2 to 5, more preferably 0.5 to 2.5, especially about 1.5. When the sulphonic acid group is at least 95% in the salt form the composition preferably has a pH of 1 to 10, more preferably 1.5 to 7.

In one embodiment the composition is free from radical initiators. In another embodiment the composition comprises a radical initiator, for example a photoinitiator.

When the composition contains 0% radical initiator it may be cured using electron beam radiation.

Preferably, however, the composition comprises 0.01 to 10 wt%, more preferably 0.05 to 5 wt%, especially 0.1 to 2wt% radical initiator. The preferred radical initiator is a photoinitiator.

The radical initiator is often referred to as component (iv) in this specification.

The curable composition may comprise one or more than one radical initiator as component.

When the composition comprises an acrylamide, diacrylamide, or higher-acrylamide, type I photoinitiators are preferred. Examples of type I photoinitiators are as described in WO 2007/018425, page 14, line 23 to page 15, line 26, which are incorporated herein by reference thereto. Especially preferred photoinitiators include alpha-hydroxyalkylphenones, e.g. 2-hydroxy-2-methyl-1-phenyl propan-1-one and 2-hydroxy-2-methyl-1-(4-tert-butyl-) phenylpropan-1-one, and acylphosphine oxides, e.g. 2,4,6-trimethylbenzoyl-diphenylphosphine oxide, and bis(2,4,6-trimethylbenzoyl)-phenylphosphine oxide.

When a radical initiator is present in the composition, preferably a polymerization inhibitor is also included (e.g. in an amount of below 2wt%). This is useful to prevent premature curing of the composition during, for example, storage. Suitable inhibitors include hydroquinone, hydroquinone mono methyl ether, 2,6-di-t-butyl-4-methylphenol, 4-t-butyl-catechol, phenothiazine, 4-oxo-2,2,6,6-tetramethyl-1-piperidinoloxo, free radical, 4-hydroxy-2,2,6,6-tetramethyl-1-piperidinoloxo, free radical, 2,6-dinitro-sec-butylphenol, tris(N-nitroso-N-phenylhydroxylamine) aluminum salt, OmnistabTM IN 510, GenoradTM polymerisation inhibitors and mixtures comprising two or more of the foregoing.

The curable composition may contain other components, for example acids, pH controllers, preservatives, viscosity modifiers, stabilisers, dispersing agents, antifoam agents, organic/inorganic salts, anionic, cationic, non-ionic and/or amphoteric surfactants and the like.

The curable composition may of course contain further components not specifically mentioned or excluded above.

Curing rates may be increased by including an amine synergist in the curable composition. Suitable amine synergists are, for example, free alkyl amines, e.g. triethylamine or triethanol amine; aromatic amines, e.g. 2-ethylhexyl-4-dimethylaminobenzoate, ethyl-4-dimethylaminobenzoate and also polymeric amines as polyallylamine and its derivatives.

Curable amine synergists such as ethylenically unsaturated amines (e.g. acrylated amines) are preferable since their use will give less odour due to their ability to be incorporated into the membrane by curing.

When used the amount of amine synergists is preferably from 0.1 to 10wt.% based on the total weight of polymerisable components in the composition, more preferably from 0.3 to 3wt%.

In view of the foregoing, the composition preferably has an MF of at least 0.25 and comprises:

- (i) 2 to 80 wt% of a curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and a sulphonic acid group and having a molecular weight which satisfies the equation:

$$MW < (300 + 300n)$$

wherein:

MW is the molecular weight of the said curable compound; and
n has a value of 1, 2, 3 or 4 and is the number of sulphonic acid groups present in the said curable compound;

- (ii) 1 to 70 wt% of curable compound having one ethylenically unsaturated group;

- (iii) 0 to 40 wt% of a curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and being free from sulphonic acid groups;

- (iv) 0 to 10 wt% of radical initiator; and

- (v) 15 to 70 wt% of solvent.

In another embodiment the composition preferably has an MF of at least 0.25 and comprises:

- (i) 5 to 75 wt% of a curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and a sulphonic acid group and having a molecular weight which satisfies the equation:

$$MW < (300 + 300n)$$

wherein:

MW is the molecular weight of the said curable compound; and
n has a value of 1, 2, 3 or 4 and is the number of sulphonic acid groups present in the said curable compound;

- (ii) 0 to 60 wt% of curable compound having one ethylenically unsaturated group;

- (iii) 0 to 30 wt% of a curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and being free from sulphonic acid groups;

- (iv) 0.1 to 10 wt% of radical initiator; and

- (v) 20 to 45 wt% of solvent.

In a particularly preferred embodiment the composition has an MF of at least 0.35 and comprises:

- (i) 4 to 70 wt% of curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and a sulphonic acid group and having a molecular weight which satisfies the equation:

$$MW < (300 + 300n)$$

wherein:

MW is the molecular weight of the said curable compound; and
n has a value of 1, 2, 3 or 4 and is the number of sulphonic acid groups present in the said curable compound;

- (ii) 10 to 60 wt% of curable compound having one ethylenically unsaturated group;

- (iii) 0 to 30 wt% of curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and being free from sulphonic acid groups;

- (iv) 0.1 to 10 wt% of radical initiator; and

- (v) 25 to 45 wt% of solvent comprising water or a mixture comprising water and a water-miscible organic solvent.

Furthermore, component (I) preferably comprises a compound of the Formula (1) as hereinbefore defined.

The aforementioned compositions form a further feature of the present invention.

Preferably the composition is free from, or substantially free from, methacrylic compounds (e.g. methacrylate and methacrylamide compounds), i.e. the composition comprises at most 10 wt% of compounds comprising one or more methacrylic groups.

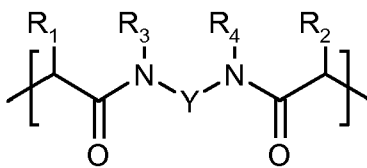
Preferably the composition is free from, or substantially free from, divinyl benzene and derivatives thereof.

Preferably the composition is free from, or substantially free from, styrene and derivatives thereof.

Preferably the composition is free from, or substantially free from, dyes and pigments. This is because there is no need to include dyes or pigments in the composition.

Thus the preferred composition is free from, or substantially free from, divinyl benzene, dyes, pigments, styrene, methacrylic compounds and compounds having tetralkyl-substituted quaternary ammonium groups.

The presence of a compound of Formula (1) in the composition provides membranes comprising the following structural unit of Formula (1'):



Formula (1')

wherein R_1 , R_2 , R_3 , R_4 and Y are as hereinbefore defined and provided that the structural unit of Formula (1') has 1, 2, 3 or 4 sulphonic acid groups.

Membranes comprising the above structural unit form a further feature of the present invention. The concentration of such units in the membrane will depend on the concentration of the compound of Formula (1) used to make the membrane relative to the amount of any other curable components in the aforementioned composition. Such membranes preferably further comprise structural units obtained from curing component (ii).

According to a second aspect of the present invention there is provided a process for preparing a membrane comprising the following steps:

- a) applying a composition to a support; and
- b) curing the composition to form a membrane;

wherein the composition is the composition defined in the first aspect of the present invention.

Hitherto membranes have often been made in slow and energy intensive processes, often having many stages. The present invention enables the manufacture of membranes in a simple process that may be run continuously for long periods of time to mass produce membranes relatively cheaply.

Optionally the process comprises the further step of separating the cured composition and support. However if desired this further step may be omitted and thereby a composite membrane is produced comprising the cured composition and a porous support.

The thickness of the membrane, including the support, when present, is preferably less than 250 μ m, more preferably between 10 and 200 μ m, most preferably between 20 and 150 μ m.

Preferably the membrane has a calculated ion exchange capacity ("IEC") of at least 0.1meq/g, more preferably of at least 0.3meq/g, especially more than 0.6meq/g, more especially more than 1.0meq/g, particularly more than 3.5meq/g of total dry weight of the composition. IEC's towards the upper end of these ranges are preferred in order to reduce the electrical resistance of the resultant membrane. The resultant IEC is expressed as milli-equivalents per gram of dry (i.e. solvent-free) composition (meq/g). Any solvents present in the composition, including any non-curable diluents or waters of crystallisation present in any

ingredient used to make the composition, are therefore excluded from the calculation of IEC.

Preferably the membrane has a high calculated crosslink density ("CD") in order to improve the strength and robustness of the resultant membrane. By including component (i) in the composition a high IEC in combination with a high CD can be achieved.

The CD in mmol/g may be calculated for a composition comprising n different curable compounds as follows:

$$CD = \sum_{i=1}^n ((x_i-1) \cdot M_i / MW_i) / M_{total}$$

wherein:

M_i is the amount of compound i having x_i curable groups in grams;

MW_i is the molecular weight of compound i in g per mmol; and

M_{total} is the total amount of curable compounds in grams.

The above determinations are performed in the absence of any support for the membrane. Any solvents present in the composition, including any non-curable diluents or waters of crystallisation present in any ingredient used to make the composition, are therefore excluded from the calculation of CD.

For example, a composition comprising 55.3 g of bis(acryloylamido)-2-methylpropane-2-sulphonic acid (having an MW of 276.31 g/mol and $n=2$), 46.3 g of N,N'-methylene bisacrylamide (having an MW of 154.17 g/mol and $n=2$) and 228 g of 2-acryloylamido-2-methylpropanesulfonic acid (having an MW of 207.24 g/mol and $n=1$) would have a CD of $(55.3/0.27631)/329.5 + (46.3/0.15417)/329.5 = 1.52$ mmol/g.

Preferably the CD is at least 1.3 mmol/g, more preferably at least 1.5 mmol/g, especially at least 1.75 mmol/g.

Preferably the membrane has a permselectivity for small cations (e.g. Na^+) of more than 80%, more preferably more than 85%, especially more than 90% and more especially more than 95%.

Preferably the membrane has an electrical resistance less than 50 ohm.cm^2 , most preferably less than 30 ohm.cm^2 . The electrical resistance may be determined by the method described below in the examples section.

Preferably the membrane exhibits a % weight loss when ultrasonicated for 99 minutes and broken-off parts of the membrane are removed, of less than 3%, more preferably less than 1%. The % weight loss can be controlled by, for example, selecting appropriate amounts of components (ii) and (iii) and by adjusting appropriate parameters in the curing step.

Electrical resistance and permselectivity may be measured by the methods described by Djugolecki et al, J. of Membrane Science, 319 (2008) on pages 217-218.

Typically the ion exchange membrane is substantially non-porous e.g. the pores are smaller than the detection limit of a standard Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM). Thus using a Jeol JSM-6335F Field Emission SEM (applying an accelerating voltage of 2kV, working distance 4 mm, aperture 4, sample coated with Pt with a thickness of 1.5nm, magnification 100,000x, 3° tilted view) the average pore size is generally smaller than 5nm, preferably smaller than 2 nm.

The resultant membrane preferably has a low water permeability so that ions may pass through the membrane and water molecules do not pass through the membrane. Preferably the membrane's water permeability is lower than $1 \times 10^{-7} \text{ m}^3/\text{m}^2 \cdot \text{s} \cdot \text{kPa}$, more preferably lower than $1 \times 10^{-8} \text{ m}^3/\text{m}^2 \cdot \text{s} \cdot \text{kPa}$, most preferably lower than $1 \times 10^{-9} \text{ m}^3/\text{m}^2 \cdot \text{s} \cdot \text{kPa}$, especially lower than $1 \times 10^{-10} \text{ m}^3/\text{m}^2 \cdot \text{s} \cdot \text{kPa}$. The requirements for water permeability depend on the intended use of the membrane.

Where desired, a surfactant or combination of surfactants may be included in the composition as a wetting agent or to adjust surface tension. Commercially available surfactants may be utilized, including radiation-curable surfactants. Surfactants suitable for use in the composition include non-ionic surfactants, ionic surfactants, amphoteric surfactants and combinations thereof.

Preferred surfactants are as described in WO 2007/018425, page 20, line 15 to page 22, line 6, which are incorporated herein by reference thereto. Fluorosurfactants are particularly preferred, especially Zonyl® FSN (produced by E.I. Du Pont).

Preferably the components of the composition are selected such that no phase separation occurs during the curing step. In this way, the likelihood of a porous structure in the resultant membrane is reduced.

The network structure of the membrane is determined to a large extent by the identity of the crosslinking agent(s) and the curable compound and their functionality, e.g. the number of crosslinkable groups they contain per molecule.

During application of the composition to a support, the composition may form a layer on top of the support, or it may permeate wholly or partially into the pores of the support thereby forming an impregnated composite membrane after curing. The composition may also be applied to both sides of the support to achieve a symmetrical composite membrane. In a preferred embodiment the support is saturated with the composition and the saturated support is cured by EB or UV irradiation.

The process of the present invention may contain further steps if desired, for example washing and/or drying the resultant membrane.

Before applying the composition to the surface of the support, the support may be subjected to a corona discharge treatment, plasma glow discharge treatment, flame treatment, ultraviolet light irradiation treatment, chemical treatment or the like, e.g. for the purpose of improving its wettability and the adhesiveness.

The support may also be treated to modify its surface energy, e.g. to values above 70 mN/m.

While it is possible to prepare the membrane on a batch basis using a stationary support, to gain full advantage of the invention it is much preferred to prepare the membrane on a continuous basis using a moving support. The support may be in the form of a roll which is unwound continuously or the support may rest on a continuously driven belt (or a combination of these methods). Using such techniques the composition can be applied to the support on a continuous basis or it can be applied on a large batch basis.

The composition may be applied to the support by any suitable method, for example by curtain coating, blade coating, air-knife coating, knife-over-roll coating, slide coating, nip roll coating, forward roll coating, reverse roll coating, micro-roll coating, dip coating, foulard coating, kiss coating, rod bar coating or spray coating. The coating of multiple layers can be done simultaneously or consecutively. For simultaneous coating of multiple layers, curtain coating, slide coating and slot die coating are preferred. The composition may be applied to one side of the support or to both sides of the support.

In one embodiment at least two of the compositions are applied to the support, e.g. simultaneously or consecutively. The compositions may be applied to the same side of the support or to different sides. Thus the application step may be performed more than once, either with or without curing being performed between each application. When applied to different sides the resultant composite membrane may be symmetrical or asymmetrical and the layers of the composition may have the same or different thicknesses. When applied to the same side a composite membrane may be formed comprising at least one top layer and at least one bottom layer that is closer to the support than the top layer. In this embodiment the top layer and bottom layer, together with any intervening layers, constitute the membrane and the porous support provides strength to the resultant composite membrane.

Thus in a preferred process, the composition is applied continuously to a moving support, more preferably by means of a manufacturing unit comprising one or more composition application station(s), one or more irradiation source(s) for curing the composition, a membrane collecting station and a means for moving the

support from the composition application station(s) to the irradiation source(s) and to the membrane collecting station.

The composition application station(s) may be located at an upstream position relative to the irradiation source(s) and the irradiation source(s) is/are located at an upstream position relative to the membrane collecting station.

In order to produce a sufficiently flowable composition for application by a high speed coating machine, it is preferred that the composition has a viscosity below 5000mPa.s when measured at 35°C, more preferably from 1 to 1500mPa.s when measured at 35°C. Most preferably the viscosity of the composition is from 2 to 500mPa.s when measured at 35°C. For coating methods such as slide bead coating the preferred viscosity is from 2 to 150mPa.s when measured at 35°C.

With suitable coating techniques, the composition may be applied to a support moving at a speed of over 5m/min, preferably over 10m/min, more preferably over 15m/min, e.g. more than 20m/min, or even higher speeds, such as 60m/min, 120m/min or up to 400m/min can be reached.

Curing is preferably performed by radical polymerisation, preferably using electromagnetic radiation. The source of radiation may be any source which provides the wavelength and intensity of radiation necessary to cure the composition. A typical example of a UV light source for curing is a D-bulb with an output of 600 Watts/inch (240 W/cm) as supplied by Fusion UV Systems. Alternatives are the V-bulb and the H-bulb from the same supplier.

When no photoinitiator is included in the composition, the composition can be cured by electron-beam exposure, e.g. using an exposure of 50 to 300 keV. Curing can also be achieved by plasma or corona exposure.

During curing the components (i) and (ii) (when present) polymerise to form a polymeric membrane. The curing may be brought about by any suitable means, e.g. by irradiation and/or heating. Preferably curing occurs sufficiently rapidly to form a membrane within 30 seconds. If desired further curing may be applied subsequently to finish off, although generally this is not necessary.

The curing is preferably achieved thermally (e.g. by irradiating with infrared light) or, more preferably, by irradiating the composition with ultraviolet light or an electron beam.

For thermal curing the composition preferably comprises one or more thermally reactive free radical initiators, preferably being present in an amount of 0.01 to 5 parts per 100 parts of curable composition, wherein all parts are by weight.

Examples of thermally reactive free radical initiators include organic peroxides, e.g. ethyl peroxide and/or benzyl peroxide; hydroperoxides, e.g. methyl hydroperoxide, acyloins, e.g. benzoin; certain azo compounds, e.g. α,α' -

azobisisobutyronitrile and/or γ,γ' -azobis(γ -cyanovaleric acid); persulfates; peracetates, e.g. methyl peracetate and/or tert-butyl peracetate; peroxalates, e.g. dimethyl peroxalate and/or di(tert-butyl) peroxalate; disulfides, e.g. dimethyl thiuramdisulfide and ketone peroxides, e.g. methyl ethyl ketone peroxide.

5 Temperatures in the range of from about 30°C to about 150°C are generally employed for infrared curing. More often, temperatures in the range of from about 40°C to about 110°C are used.

10 Preferably curing of the composition begins within 3 minutes, more preferably within 60 seconds, after the composition has been applied to the support.

Preferably the curing is achieved by irradiating the composition for less than 30 seconds, more preferably less than 10 seconds, especially less than 3 seconds, more especially less than 2 seconds. In a continuous process the irradiation occurs continuously and the speed at which the composition moves

15 through the beam of irradiation is mainly what determines the time period of curing.

Preferably the curing uses ultraviolet light. Suitable wavelengths are for instance UV-A (390 to 320nm), UV-B (320 to 280nm), UV-C (280 to 200nm) and UV-V (445 to 395nm), provided the wavelength matches with the absorbing

20 wavelength of any photo-initiator included in the curable composition.

Suitable sources of ultraviolet light are mercury arc lamps, carbon arc lamps, low pressure mercury lamps, medium pressure mercury lamps, high pressure mercury lamps, swirlflow plasma arc lamps, metal halide lamps, xenon lamps, tungsten lamps, halogen lamps, lasers and ultraviolet light emitting diodes.

25 Particularly preferred are ultraviolet light emitting lamps of the medium or high pressure mercury vapour type. In most cases lamps with emission maxima between 200 and 450nm are particularly suitable.

The energy output of the irradiation source is preferably from 20 to 1000 W/cm, preferably from 40 to 500 W/cm but may be higher or lower as long as the

30 desired exposure dose can be realized. The exposure intensity is one of the parameters that can be used to control the extent of curing which influences the final structure of the membrane. Preferably the exposure dose is at least 40mJ/cm², more preferably between 40 and 1500mJ/cm², most preferably between 70 and 900mJ/cm² as measured by a High Energy UV Radiometer (UV PowerMap™ from EIT, Inc) in the UV-A and UV-B range indicated by the

35 apparatus. Exposure times can be chosen freely but preferably are short and are typically less than 10 seconds, more preferably less than 5 seconds, especially less than 3 seconds, more especially less than 2 seconds, e.g. between 0.1 and 1 second.

To reach the desired exposure dose at high coating speeds, more than one UV lamp may be used, so that the composition is irradiated more than once. When two or more lamps are used, all lamps may give an equal dose or each lamp may have an individual setting. For instance the first lamp may give a higher dose than the second and following lamps or the exposure intensity of the first lamp may be lower. Varying the exposure dose of each lamp may influence the polymer matrix structure and the final crosslink density. In a preferred embodiment the composition is cured by simultaneous irradiation from opposite sides using two or more irradiation sources, e.g. two lamps (one at each side). The two or more irradiation sources preferably irradiate the composition with the same intensity as each other. By using this symmetric configuration, a higher crosslinking efficiency can be achieved and curling of the membrane can be reduced or prevented.

Photoinitiators may be included in the composition, as mentioned above, and are usually required when curing uses UV or visible light radiation. Suitable photoinitiators are those known in the art.

Curing is preferably performed at between 20 and 60°C. While higher temperatures may be used, these are not preferred because they can lead to higher manufacturing costs.

Preferred supports are porous, e.g. they may be a woven or non-woven synthetic fabric, e.g. polyethylene, polypropylene, polyacrylonitrile, polyvinyl chloride, polyester, polyamide, and copolymers thereof, or porous membranes based on e.g. polysulfone, polyethersulfone, polyphenylenesulfone, polyphenylenesulfide, polyimide, polyetherimide, polyamide, polyamideimide, polyacrylonitrile, polycarbonate, polyacrylate, cellulose acetate, polypropylene, poly(4-methyl 1-pentene), polyvinylidene fluoride, polytetrafluoroethylene, polyhexafluoropropylene, polychlorotrifluoroethylene, and copolymers thereof.

Commercially available porous supports are available from a number of sources, e.g. from Freudenberg Filtration Technologies (Novatexx materials) and Sefar AG.

The present process allows the preparation of membranes having a desirable degree of flexibility, without being overly flexible or too rigid. The compositions can provide thin membranes with low numbers of defects, low tendency to curl while retaining good durability in use.

According to a third aspect of the present invention there is provided a membrane obtained by a process according to the second aspect of the present invention.

The membranes according to the third aspect of the present invention may also be put to other uses requiring membranes having anionic groups.

The membranes according to the third aspect of the present invention preferably have the properties described above in relation to the second aspect of the present invention.

5 According to a fourth aspect of the present invention there is provided use of a membrane according to the first or third aspect of the present invention for the separation or purification of liquids, vapours or gases.

The membranes of the invention are particularly useful for water purification, the generation of electricity etc. for example in ED, (C)EDI, EDR, FTC, ZLD, ZDD or RED, although they may also be used for other purposes.

10 According to a fourth aspect of the present invention there is provided an electrodialysis or reverse electrodialysis unit, a flow through capacitor device, an electrodeionization module, a continuous electrodeionization module, a fuel cell, a diffusion dialysis apparatus, a membrane distillation module or a membrane electrode assembly comprising one or more polymeric membranes according to
15 the present invention.

Preferably the electrodialysis or reverse electrodialysis unit or the electrodeionization module or the flow through capacitor comprises at least one anode, at least one cathode and one or more membranes according to the first or third aspect of the present invention. Further the unit preferably comprises an inlet
20 for providing a flow of water having a relatively high salt content along a first side of a membrane according to the present invention and an inlet for providing a flow of water having a relatively low salt content along a second side of the membrane such that ions pass from the first side to the second side of the membrane. Preferably the one or more membranes of the unit comprise a membrane
25 according to the first or third aspect of the present invention having anionic groups and a further membrane having cationic groups.

In a preferred embodiment the unit comprises at least 3, more preferably at least 5, e.g. 36, 64 or up to 500 or even 1000, membranes according to the first or third aspect of the present invention, the number of membranes being dependent
30 on the application. The membrane may for instance be used in a plate-and-frame or stacked-disk configuration or in a spiral-wound design. Alternatively, a continuous first membrane according to the present invention having anionic groups may be folded in a concertina (or zigzag) manner and a second membrane having cationic groups (i.e. of opposite charge to the first membrane) may be
35 inserted between the folds to form a plurality of channels along which fluid may pass and having alternate anionic and cationic membranes as side walls.

The invention will now be illustrated with non-limiting examples where all parts and percentages are by weight unless specified otherwise.

In the examples the following properties were measured by the methods described below.

General Test Methods

5 **Permselectivity ("PS")** was measured by using a static membrane potential measurement. Two cells were separated by the membrane under investigation. Prior to the measurement the membrane was equilibrated in a 0.1 M NaCl solution for at least 12 hours. Two streams having different NaCl concentrations were passed through cells on opposite sides of the membranes under investigation. One stream had a concentration of 0.1M NaCl (from Sigma Aldrich, min. 99.5% purity) and the other stream was 0.5 M NaCl. The flow rate of both streams was 0.90dm³/min. Two Calomel reference electrodes (from Metrohm AG, Switzerland) were connected to Haber-Luggin capillary tubes that were inserted in each cell and were used to measure the potential difference over the membrane. The effective membrane area was 3.14 cm² and the temperature was 21°C.

When a steady state was reached, the membrane potential was measured (ΔV_{meas}).

20 The permselectivity (α (%)) of the membrane was calculated according the formula:

$$\alpha (\%) = \Delta V_{\text{meas}} / \Delta V_{\text{theor}} * 100\%.$$

The theoretical membrane potential (ΔV_{theor}) is the potential for a 100% permselective membrane as calculated using the Nernst equation.

25 To compensate for day-to-day measurement fluctuations in all α (%) measurements an internal standard was included which was used to normalize the results. The internal standard used was CMX membrane from Tokuyama Soda; its α (%) value was determined to be 98%.

30 **Electrical resistance ("ER")** (ohm.cm²) was measured by the method described by Djugolecki et al, J. of Membrane Science, 319 (2008) on page 217-218 with the following modifications:

- the auxiliary membranes were CMX and AMX from Tokuyama Soda, Japan;
- a Cole Parmermasterflex console drive (77521-47) with easy load II model 77200-62 gear pumps was used for all compartments;
- 35 • the flowrate of each stream was 475 ml/min controlled by Porter Instrument flowmeters (type 150AV-B250-4RVS) and Cole Parmerflowmeters (type G-30217-90);
- the effective area of the membrane was 3.14 cm².

The **membrane strength** was determined by the following method which measured the amount of membrane which broke off as a result of an ultrasonic treatment. A dry 0.45 μm filter from Millipore was acclimatised to ambient conditions for 1 hour and then weighed accurately (W1). The dry membrane under test (800 cm^2) was acclimatised to ambient conditions for 1 hour and then weighed to give W_{membrane} , cut into pieces, placed in a beaker containing water (200 cm^3) and the beaker was placed in a Branson 8210 ultrasonic bath for 99 minutes. After this treatment the water was decanted off the pieces and filtered through the abovementioned filter. The pieces were carefully rinsed with water at 40°C to remove any pieces of membrane broken off by the ultrasonic treatment, and the washings were also filtered, taking care to retain intact membrane in the beaker. The filter (including any broken off pieces of membrane) was dried at 30°C in a vacuum oven overnight and then weighed after acclimatizing it for an hour under the same conditions as the filter had been acclimatized prior to the filtration (W2). The % weight loss (which is inversely proportional to membrane strength) arising from ultrasonic treatment was calculated as follows:

$$\% \text{ weight loss} = 100\% \times (W2 - W1) / W_{\text{membrane}}$$

A low weight loss indicates a strong membrane and a high weight loss indicates a weak membrane.

pH measurements were performed using a Metrohm 691 pH meter equipped with a Metrohm 6.0228.000 electrode, calibrated at 20 °C with standard buffers of pH 4 and 7.

CD is the calculated crosslink density in mmol/g and IEC is the calculated ion exchange capacity in meq/g (both calculated as described above).

MF is the molar fraction of curable compounds comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups, relative to the total number of moles of curable compounds present in the composition (calculated as described above),

Ingredients

BAMPS - is 1,1-bis(acryloylamido)-2-methylpropane-2-sulphonic acid, synthesized as described in US 4,034,001 (a curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and a sulphonic acid group), having a molecular weight of 276.3.

MBA - is N,N'-methylene bisacrylamide from Sigma Aldrich (a curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and being free from sulphonic acid groups), having a molecular weight of 154.2.

AMPS - is 2-Acryloylamido-2-methylpropanesulfonic acid from Hang-Zhou (China) (a curable compound having one ethylenically unsaturated group), having a molecular weight of 207.2.

5 BAHP - is 1,4-bis(acryloyl) homopiperazine, synthesized as described in WO2010/106356 (a curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and being free from sulphonic acid groups), having a molecular weight of 208.

IPA- is 2-propanol from Shell.

GenoradTM - is a polymerization inhibitor.

10 DarocurTM 1173 - is a photoinitiator.

NovatexxTM 2226-14E - is a nonwoven polypropylene/polyethylene material from Freudenberg Filtration Technologies.

Examples 1 to 7 and Comparative Examples 1 to 7

15 Compositions Ex 1 to Ex 7 and comparative compositions CE1 to CE7 were prepared by mixing the ingredients expressed as wt% shown in Tables 1 and 2.

The resultant compositions were applied to an aluminium underground carrier using a 150 µm wire wound bar, at a speed of approximately 5 m/min, by hand, followed by application to a non-woven support (NovatexxTM 2226-14E) levelled using a 4 micrometer wire wound rod coater. The temperature of the compositions was 20-60°C.

20 A membrane was prepared by curing the coated support using a Light Hammer LH6 from Fusion UV Systems fitted with a D-bulb working at 100% intensity with a speed of 30 m/min (single pass). The exposure time was 0.47 seconds.

25 After curing, the membrane was stored in a 0.1 M NaCl solution for at least 12 hours.

Table 1

Ingredient	Ex 1	Ex 2	Ex 3	Ex 4	Ex 5	Ex 6	Ex 7
AMPS	24.6	30.8	37.4	15.9	16.2	0	0
BAMPS	37.3	23.3	28.2	45.0	46.4	62.6	67.2
Water	37.1	44.9	33.4	28.2	36.4	36.4	31.8
LiOH.H ₂ O	0	0	0	9.9	0	0	0
Genorad TM 16	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Darocur TM 1173	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
MF	0.53	0.36	0.36	0.68	0.68	1.0	1.0
CD (mmol/g)	2.1	1.5	1.5	2.6	2.6	3.6	3.6
IEC (meq/g)	4.0	4.2	4.2	3.8	3.9	3.6	3.6
Results							
PS (α (%))	95.5	89.8	92.5	95.3	95.9	97.1	97.2
ER (ohm.cm ²)	4.1	2.0	2.2	3.2	3.1	4.1	3.9
Membrane % weight loss after ultrasonic treatment	0.3	0.8	0.9	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.2

Table 2

Ingredient	CE1	CE2	CE3	CE4	CE5	CE6	CE7
AMPS	50.3	52.1	45.3	32.1	39.3	44.2	25.8
MBA	12.0	0	0	0	0	0	0
BAHP	0	0	0	0	0	0	39.0
BAMPS	0	10.2	17.1	12.1	14.8	16.7	00
Water	28.4	36.7	36.6	54.8	44.9	38.1	10.6
IPA	8.3	0	0	0	0	0	18.5
LiOH.H ₂ O	0	0	0	0	0	0	5.1
Genorad TM 16	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Darocur TM 1173	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
MF	0.24	0.13	0.22	0.22	0.22	0.22	0.60
CD (mmol/g)	1.2	0.6	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	2.8
IEC (meq/g)	3.8	4.6	4.4	4.4	4.4	4.4	1.9
Results							
PS (α (%))	94.1	86.6	92.9	79.3	87.8	90.8	89.9
ER (ohm.cm ²)	3.2	2.3	2.8	1.1	1.4	1.4	10.4
Membrane % weight loss after ultrasonic treatment	3.9	8.0	6.9	7.9	6.9	11.6	0.1

CLAIMS

1. A membrane obtainable from curing a composition comprising:

(i) a curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and a sulphonic acid group and having a molecular weight which satisfies the equation:

$$MW < (300 + 300n)$$

wherein:

MW is the molecular weight of the said curable compound; and

n has a value of 1, 2, 3 or 4 and is the number of sulphonic acid groups present in the said curable compound;

and optionally (ii) a curable compound having one ethylenically unsaturated group; wherein the molar fraction of curable compounds comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups, relative to the total number of moles of curable compounds present in the composition, is at least 0.25.

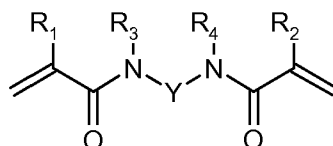
2. A membrane according to claim 1 wherein the composition further comprises a radical initiator.

3. A membrane according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the composition further comprises water or a mixture comprising water and a water-miscible organic solvent.

4. A membrane according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the (meth)acrylic groups in component (i) are (meth)acrylamide groups.

5. A membrane according to any one of the preceding claims wherein component (ii) further comprises an anionic group.

6. A membrane according to any one of the preceding claims wherein component (i) comprises a compound of the Formula (1):



Formula (1)

wherein:

R₁ and R₂ are each independently H or methyl;

R_3 and R_4 are each independently H or alkyl, or R_3 and R_4 together with the N atoms to which they are attached and Y form an optionally substituted 6- or 7-membered ring; and
 Y is an optionally substituted and optionally interrupted alkylene or arylene group;

provided that the compound of Formula (1) has 1, 2, 3 or 4 sulphonic acid groups; and

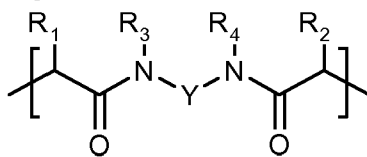
provided that the compound of Formula (1) has a molecular weight which satisfies the equation:

$$MW < (300 + 300n)$$

wherein:

MW is the molecular weight of the compound of Formula (1); and
 n has a value of 1, 2, 3 or 4 and is the number of sulphonic acid groups present in the compound of the Formula (1).

7. A membrane comprising a structural unit of Formula (1'):



Formula (1')

wherein:

R_1 and R_2 are each independently H or methyl;
 R_3 and R_4 are each independently H or alkyl, or R_3 and R_4 together with the N atoms to which they are attached and Y form an optionally substituted 6- or 7-membered ring; and
 Y is an optionally substituted and optionally interrupted alkylene or arylene group;

provided that the structural unit of Formula (1') has 1, 2, 3 or 4 sulphonic acid groups.

8. A membrane according to any one of the preceding claims having an IEC of at least 3.5 meq/g of total dry weight of the composition.

9. A composition comprising:

(i) 2 to 80 wt% of a curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and a sulphonic acid group and having a molecular weight which satisfies the equation:

$$MW < (300 + 300n)$$

wherein:

MW is the molecular weight of the said curable compound; and
 n has a value of 1, 2, 3 or 4 and is the number of sulphonic acid groups present in the said curable compound;

- 5 (ii) 1 to 70 wt% of curable compound having one ethylenically unsaturated group;
- (iii) 0 to 40 wt% of curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and being free from sulphonic acid groups;
- (iv) 0 to 10 wt% of radical initiator; and
- 10 (v) 15 to 70 wt% of solvent;

wherein the molar fraction of curable compounds comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups, relative to the total number of moles of curable compounds present in the composition, is at least 0.25.

- 15 10. A composition according to claim 9 comprising:

- (i) 4 to 70 wt% of curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and a sulphonic acid group and having a molecular weight which satisfies the equation:

$$MW < (300 + 300n)$$

- 20 wherein:

MW is the molecular weight of the said curable compound; and
 n has a value of 1, 2, 3 or 4 and is the number of sulphonic acid groups present in the said curable compound;

- (ii) 10 to 60 wt% of curable compound having one ethylenically unsaturated group;
- 25 (iii) 0 to 30 wt% of curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and being free from sulphonic acid groups;
- (iv) 0.1 to 10 wt% of radical initiator; and
- (v) 25 to 45 wt% of solvent comprising water or a mixture comprising water and a water-miscible organic solvent;
- 30

wherein the molar fraction of curable compounds comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups, relative to the total number of moles of curable compounds present in the composition, is at least 0.35.

- 35 11. A composition according to claim 9 to 10 wherein component (ii) further comprises an anionic group.

12. A composition comprising:

- (i) 5 to 75 wt% of a curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and a sulphonic acid group and having a molecular weight which satisfies the equation:

$$MW < (300 + 300n)$$

5 wherein:

MW is the molecular weight of the said curable compound; and
n has a value of 1, 2, 3 or 4 and is the number of sulphonic acid groups present in the said curable compound;

- (ii) 0 to 60 wt% of curable compound having one ethylenically unsaturated group;
10 (iii) 0 to 30 wt% of curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and being free from sulphonic acid groups;
(iv) 0.1 to 10 wt% of radical initiator; and
(v) 20 to 45 wt% of solvent;

15 wherein the molar fraction of curable compounds comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups, relative to the total number of moles of curable compounds present in the composition, is at least 0.25.

13. A process for preparing a membrane comprising the following steps:

- 20 a) applying a composition to a support; and
b) curing the composition to form a membrane;

wherein the composition comprises:

- (i) a curable compound comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups and a sulphonic acid group and having a molecular weight which satisfies the equation:

25
$$MW < (300 + 300n)$$

wherein:

MW is the molecular weight of the said curable compound; and
n has a value of 1, 2, 3 or 4 and is the number of sulphonic acid groups present in the said curable compound;

30 and optionally (ii) a curable compound having one ethylenically unsaturated group;
wherein the molar fraction of curable compounds comprising at least two (meth)acrylic groups, relative to the total number of moles of curable compounds present in the composition, is at least 0.25.

35 14. A process according to claim 13 wherein the composition is as defined in claim 9, 10, 11 or 12.

15. A process according to claim 13 or 14 wherein the curing is performed using electron beam or UV radiation.

5 16. A process according to any claim 15 wherein the composition is cured by irradiation with an electron beam or UV light for a period of less than 30 seconds.

10 17. A process according to any one of claims 13 to 16 wherein the composition is applied continuously to a moving support by means of a manufacturing unit comprising a composition application station, an irradiation source for curing the composition, a membrane collecting station and a means for moving the support from the composition application station to the irradiation source and to the membrane collecting station.

15 18. A process according to any one of claims 13 to 17 wherein the curable composition is applied to the support moving at a speed of over 5 m/min.

19. Use of a membrane according to any one of claims 1 to 8 for the separation or purification of liquids, vapours or gases.

20 20. An electrodialysis or reverse electrodialysis unit, a flow through capacitor device, an electrodeionization module, a continuous electrodeionization module, a fuel cell, a diffusion dialysis apparatus, a membrane distillation module or a membrane electrode assembly comprising one or more polymeric membranes according to any one of claims 1 to 8.