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Bioprocess intensification: Cases that (don’t) work

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Development of affordable and low carbon biobased manufacturing depends critically on strategies that reduce cost and emission profiles. This paper indicates that efforts around the reduction of capital costs by intensification of process equipment need to be carefully weighed against the inherently fast increasing financial and climate costs of driving forces used for the intensification. The fundamental relation between capital expenditures (CAPEX) and operational expenditures (OPEX) of intensified and non-intensified biobased processes and their financial and climatic impacts are emphasized and provisionally explored for a few industrial processes. General learnings flag the importance in particular of OPEX minimisation for sustainable bio-economic development.

1. Introduction

Biobased manufacturing is an indispensable pillar of sustainable ‘green’ economic development, in combination with wind and solar renewable energy and with increased circularity of carbon and other (nitrogen) streams. Significant challenges exist to enhance material utilisation from renewable feedstocks, often with high oxygen content (biomass, sugars, municipal solid waste, waste industry gases such as CO2 and CO), in an industrial landscape that is designed to optimise hydrocarbon yields from fossil feedstocks of coal, crude oil and natural gas. Improving product(s) yield on feedstock is critical and directly correlated to optimising economic impacts and revenues and lowering operational expenditures (OPEX), as well as to reduction of emissions and waste streams. Profitability and environmental footprint are thereby strongly related, ideally synergistically.

A second group of challenges is related to the current situation in which feedstock and conversion technology are essentially developed around feedstocks with a high water content or dissolved in aqueous streams. Whether (clean) water is a main or byproduct, volumes are large and the components to be converted are relatively dilute. There is a significant need to intensify and integrate the associated process equipment to control the capital expenditures (CAPEX).

Process Intensification [1] (PI) is “commonly seen as one of the most promising development paths for the chemical process industry and one of the most important progress areas for modern chemical engineering”. In their publication in 2009, Gerven and Stankiewicz reviewed the PI field, and summarised this into a generic approach across principles of time and length scales, thermodynamic conditions and potential synergy (process integration aspects) as is shown in Fig. 1. These observations were further extended in [2]. In that case, integration of unit operations, such as in situ product recovery in bioreactors or cell retention systems, represents a specific class of process intensification, with complex design rules [3]. Those ideas were also elaborated in [4–6] for bioprocesses, and provided a range of useful insights into design rules for industrial scale bioprocesses. In all cases, the attention of PI efforts was significantly focused on maximising driving forces (Δ) to increase (intensify) conversion and transport rates (R) in order to reduce scales, volumes (V) and thus CAPEX of such processes. (Fig. 1, Fig. 2).
While CAPEX-related expenditures are critical components in process design choices, they are not the only ones. In our experience, an integral approach is necessary to optimise the full economic and climate potential of biobased manufacturing. (Bio) process integration is defined as the collection of measures maximising financial and climate impacts of manufacturing plants, balancing equipment related approaches such as in (bio)process intensification with those on yields and use of auxiliaries. Hence, in this article, we place (bio)PI in a broader context of (bio)process integration by exploring the following questions:

1. Is maximising rates and thus driving forces a generally beneficial concept or are there inherent and fundamental restrictions to this orientation of PI, especially for biobased manufacturing?

2. Yields of product from feedstocks are central in economic models as well as in environmental footprint. Is the general focus of (bio)PI on rate and driving force maximisation the right trend, (even) if the basic yields of product are equal in intensified and non-intensified situations?

3. True challenges in biobased manufacturing are especially with competitiveness of commodity products such as energy carriers (fuels) and base chemicals, their energy yields from feedstock in a system/environment, given the non-equal playing field with fossil alternatives. Can PI be expected to be a large/sole contributor to solving this issue or is integration with other/additional strategies desirable or even necessary?

4. Conventional biorefineries are generally developed around one or two central products (ethanol or sugar & ethanol, pulp & paper, starch, vegetable oils) with residues labelled as ‘waste’, often used to cover the plant’s energy requirements. An integrated strategy to convert all feedstocks into marketable products [7] is likely to improve the economics and environmental footprint of the operation, but how does it relate to PI strategies with their enhanced energy requirements?

From our experiences with a range of projects at the interface of academic bioprocess engineering research and education, and industry implementation and commercialisation, we have started to explore these questions. The following is meant to start a broader effort supported by a number of ongoing projects.

2. Is maximising rates and driving forces good guidance?

Maximising rates in and between process equipment is generally seen as the core embodiment of PI, by lowering equipment volume and thus the associated capital costs. ‘Rates’ can be mass or molar (flow) rates, which can be translated using density into volumetric (flow) rates. In the following text, ‘rates’ (R) are used in a generic manner, specifying when necessary and using other variables and parameters in consistent units.

Depending on the type of process, the driving forces (Δ) can be related to gradients in concentration or composition, pressure, temperature, electrical potential for charged species, or other force fields represented by a certain potential gradient (gravity, centrifugal, magnetic, etc.) and a combination thereof. There are several excellent textbooks on the generalisation for multicomponent mass transfer under multiple driving forces such as [8,9]. The former still represents one of the most straightforward engineering approaches to transfer under multiple driving forces in multicomponent systems, relating driving force and sum of gradients in those potentials in terms of their equivalent Gibbs free energy contributions. The generalised Maxwell-Stefan model is effectively a force balance, equating sum of applicable driving forces and combined friction due to velocity differences between the diffusing species. This allows a straightforward approach to combining multiple driving forces due to gradients in composition (activity), electrical potential, pressure related energy and centrifugal force, among others. Similar approaches have been proposed for (bio)chemical conversion.
and microbial growth such as [10–14]. The driving force is also in these cases related via irreversible thermodynamics to gradients in molar Gibbs energy or chemical potential.

Adopting the general essential structure of the relation between (mass transfer or reaction) rate and applicable driving force(s), we arrive at the following, oversimplified mathematical relation:

\[ R = \kappa \Delta \]  

(1)

with \( \kappa \) being a proportionality constant in consistent units, relating increase in driving force \( \Delta \) to increase in rate \( R \). As an example, for processing mass flow rate \( \varphi_{m,n} \) in a reactor with variable \( V \), limited by mass transfer of a single species through a mass transfer interface under dilute conditions in a fluid described by linear driving force model, we obtain:

\[ \varphi_{m,n} = a V k \Delta c \]  

(2)

with \( a \) being the specific mass transfer area per unit volume and \( k \) being the mass transfer coefficient. For a biphasic system, \( k \) is the overall mass transfer coefficient, and \( \Delta c \) is the difference in composition across the interface, corrected for the distribution of the transferring species at equilibrium. In column type contactors, location dependency leads to (sets of coupled) differential equations, but the concept remains the same.

The above is an oversimplification that breaks down especially with non-linear and coupled systems and those with extremely high driving forces [8,12], but generally applies at low to medium driving forces and uncoupled systems. Volumes \( V \) of process equipment reduce when conversion and transport rates increase. So in the above example

\[ V = \frac{\varphi_{m,n}}{(a \ k \ \Delta c)} \]  

(3)

Intensification in these examples can be achieved by increased power input by mixing (stirred tanks) or flow rate (column contactors) enlarging the specific area for mass transfer and mass transfer coefficient, by increasing composition differences (concentrated feedstocks and in situ product removal), or by affecting thermodynamic and kinetic conditions by using new structured materials for conversion and separation. Specific area and mass transfer \( k \) correlate to fluid flow characteristics (Sherwood relations), but variations for a specific technology are generally modest under practical conditions.

Values for \( k \) can be estimated using the applicable mass transfer correlations, which are functions of fluid (flow) conditions (Sh \( \sim \) Re\(^n\) with power \( p \) being 0.3 laminar flow … 0.6 for packed columns … 0.8 for turbulent systems) and fluid properties (especially mixture viscosities). For LL and GL multiphase systems, increased fluid flow intensification also increases interfacial area for mass transfer, but in practice these are restricted by loading and flooding limits and practical phenomena such as emulsification and foaming. We realise this is a bold statement, requiring further evidence to verify potential for PI including those limits. They are practically constant in porous matrices (resins, adsorbents, membranes for separation and porous catalysts for conversion), unless these allow for convective flow such as monolithic and other structures [15].

CAPEX for an industrial plant is composed of fixed and working capital for the operation plus the (fraction of) R&D and start-up costs of the facility. Fixed capital is generally estimated on the basis of purchase costs (PC) of equipment and a number of overhead factors accounting for applicable piping, electrical, instrumentation, buildings and yard works, auxiliary facilities, engineering and construction [16]. The overhead factors are generally estimated as the cumulated fraction or Lang factor of PC. The Lang factor ranges from 4 to 5 for large scale commodity plants to approximately 8–9 for (bio) pharmaceutical or other specialty plants. Given the common use of the Lang factor and comparable methods, the simplification is adopted here that CAPEX is generally proportional to equipment sizes and thus reciprocally with driving forces \( \Delta \).

Scale factors often apply for volume-based equipment such as bio-reactors, distillation, extraction and adsorption equipment. Scale effects are generally represented with a power law relationship:

\[ \frac{\text{CAPEX}}{\text{CAPEX}_0} = \left( \frac{V}{V_0} \right)^n \]  

(4)

with \( n \) ranging from 0.6 for volume based equipment. For rate based equipment such as membranes and chromatography, but also heat exchangers, \( n \) is closer to unity. The subscripts 0 refer respectively to the reference situation and 1 to the intensified, scaled-down version. Hence the capital expenditures of intensified processes, relative to a benchmark scale (0) relate as:

\[ \frac{\text{CAPEX}_1}{\text{CAPEX}_0} = \frac{1}{(\Delta_1/\Delta_0)^n} \]  

(5)

where \( \Delta_0 \) relates to the driving force in the original, non-intensified benchmark situation, and \( \Delta_1 \) to the scaled-down, intensified process. Note that in terms of driving force dependencies, Eq. (5) indicates that increased driving forces are generally less effective for systems with scale effects, than for systems without scale effects.

3. Bringing OPEX to the stage

An important assumption in PI is constant operational expenditures of intensified manufacturing processes that do not relate to CAPEX, when conversion and processing yields are approximately constant. In analysing this critical assumption, reference is made back to the conversion and transport rates \( R \). Again, it is stated that those rates \( R \) are essentially proportional to the acting driving force(s) \( \Delta \), following Eq. 1.

A common and critical assumption is that the thermodynamic efficiency of the driving force remains comparable to the non-intensified reference or benchmark case. Below, it is shown that this assumption is fundamentally incorrect. This is in practical terms independent of its nature – whether related to composition, pressure, temperature, electrical or other nature. Common irreversible thermodynamics of open systems [17,18] relates the associated (thermodynamic) work per unit of time (\( W \)) of the driving force acting on a flow with rate \( R \) multiplied with the size of the driving force \( \Delta \)

\[ W = R \Delta. \]  

(6)

As an example, see the Bernoulli relation or mechanical energy balance where (mechanical) work per unit of time for pressure driven processes equals volumetric flow rate times pressure difference, in the absence of differences in potential and kinetic energy. Analogously, the electrical equivalent indicates that electrical power required for a current \( I \) through a resistance under an electrical potential difference is also the product of that current and the electrical potential difference.

There is a minimum amount of work per unit of time \( W_{\text{min}} \), which for separation processes is given by the differences in Gibbs energy of product flows and feedstocks as shown by [19]. For separation processes that require specific flow structures, such as countercurrent vapour and liquid flows in distillation, additional nett work due to irreversibilities is required to create such a dissipative structure [19,21]. The work for systems with energy intensive phase changes is approximately one order of magnitude larger than \( W_{\text{min}} \) [19] and is effectively lost (\( W_{\text{diss}} \)).

Again, it is known that the (flow) rate \( R \) is proportional to the applicable driving force. Hence the power (work per unit of time) related to the process with driving force \( \Delta \), now reads as:

\[ \dot{W} = \kappa \Delta^2 \]  

(7)

This has an unfortunate and generic consequence, namely that the work per unit of time necessary for such (intensified) processes is proportional to the square of the driving force. Assuming that the useful part is proportional to the flow (rate), the excess part that is lost is a strongly
increasing function of the degree of process intensification. This is work
generally cannot be recovered in a useful form, as it is often con-
verted into low temperature (low value) heat. It can also be represented
as an undesirable dilution of products or indirectly by regeneration of
auxiliary flows such as solvents, sorbents, resins and, in particular pro-
cesses, water.

This notion has been developed in a generic way as exergy analysis,
which refers to the remaining useful work that a flow can exert in a
particular reference environment [20]. Exergy analysis was originally
developed for thermal operations, but can straightforwardly be gener-
alised to include non-thermal operations [21], broadening its relevance
for biobased manufacturing in [22]. Exergy analysis as a fundamental
thermodynamic efficiency method complements Life Cycle Assessment
(LCA) methods, that focus on broader environmental and nowadays also
societal impacts [23].

As a result, the variable fraction of OPEX that relates to production
capacity is strongly impacted by this fundamental efficiency, even if
production yields and capacity itself are approximately constant. The
variable fraction of OPEX relates to the background of the specific
driving force, which are auxiliary energy flows such as electrical power,
heat, steam, etc., or to auxiliary material flows such as solvents, adsor-
bent or ion exchange materials, etc, with energy demanding regenera-
tion cycles. This unfortunate, inherent situation has a dual negative
effect, namely on strong increases of the associated operational costs, as
well as on increased carbon and other emissions (which also further
increase costs of waste handling).

The variable, auxiliaries fraction (AUX) of the OPEX of intensified
processes has to cover both useful and lost parts of the work in terms of
steam, electricity, auxiliary materials or other cost factors. AUX is pro-
portional to W and thus to the square of the driving force(s) on the
process. Part is inevitable ($W\text{\textsubscript{min}}$) and part is the price to pay for
the intensification ($W\text{\textsubscript{int}}$). So comparing the variable, auxiliaries fraction of
the intensified situation AUX$_1$, to that of the non-intensified, benchmark
situation AUX$_0$, we obtain

\[
\frac{\text{AUX}_1}{\text{AUX}_0} = \left(\frac{\Delta_1}{\Delta_0}\right)^2
\]

For investment decisions, both AUX and CAPEX related fractions of
OPEX matter. They are essentially related to economic indicators such as
Return on Investment (ROI), Payback Time (PBT), and to Net Present Value (NPV).
For keeping oversight, the present work is restricted to simple economic indicators such as ROI and PBT.

The fundamental challenge of PI – not often emphasized - can be
illustrated by showing the interdependencies of the degree of intensifi-
cation on all parameters and key performance indicators (KPIs) of
intensified process, as in the scheme below (Fig. 2). Our observation
based on a range of process design studies is that the overall effect of
reduced CAPEX (shown as green lines) is seriously challenged by sig-
nificant increases in the auxiliaries-related contribution to the OPEX
(red lines). Moreover, the environmental footprint will also increase
significantly due to direct use of auxiliaries or indirectly due to their
recycling. Increased climate awareness, stricter environmental regula-
tions, and investors’ preference for ‘green investments’, will emphasize
control of the AUX-component of OPEX - more and more in the future.

The generic principle is illustrated graphically by plotting the CAPEX
ratio for the intensified and benchmark cases versus the ratio of appli-
cable driving forces (Fig. 3). The resulting figure also indicates the ratio
of the auxiliaries’ contribution to the OPEX (AUX) for the process
intensified and benchmark cases versus the ratio of respective driving
forces. Note that the horizontal axis with ratio of driving forces is log-
arithmic. In the practice of industrial processes, these ratios of driving
forces vary less: halving or doubling is a more common range. Fig. 3 is
indicative: for actual processes, minimum work and restrictions to
(minimum) driving force need to be taken into account, as well as the
intensification strategy: lowering CAPEX for a fixed productivity or
optimising productivity for fixed CAPEX.

The right-hand side of the dotted line in the plot is the PI domain.
Here the linear reduction in CAPEX with increasing driving force can be
challenged severely by fast rising costs of auxiliaries and the increased
environmental footprint of the process. The left-hand side of this figure
shows low driving force situations and thus operating closer to ther-
modynamic equilibrium with significantly reduced auxiliaries re-
quirements and consequently lower OPEX and emission profiles. This
strategy, which can be called sustainable (bio) economic development
(SED), is obviously at the expense of (increased) CAPEX, and the nett
impact will be a compromise.

Some indications for the current balance of auxiliaries and CAPEX
related contributions to OPEX are shown in Table 1, derived from Pet-
rides [24] and Efe et al. [27]. Both contributions to OPEX are of a
comparable size, and both reduce when the scale of manufacturing in-
creases from specialties of a few metric tonnes per year to commodity
products in the 10 s to 100 s kilotons per year. Here raw materials costs
dominate and yields on feedstock are central cost drivers.

Use of auxiliaries in biobased manufacturing can contribute as much
as 40 % of OPEX for biopharmaceutical and specialties manufacturing
[24–26]. This is generally in the form of chemical consumables, resin
replacements and other auxiliary material costs. In commodity products,
auxiliaries amount to approximately 15–25 % in [24,27]. In the case of
commodity products, such as ethanol, butanol and organic acids, costs of
auxiliaries can be both in the form of out-of-battery-limit utility costs
such as purchased electricity, steam and heat, or as CAPEX-related costs
allocated to the energy systems of the plant such as cogeneration and
boiler installations. The associated energy flows are used directly for
the main products (by evaporation, distillation, compressing, mixing, etc)
or indirectly for the recycling and regeneration of auxiliaries materials as
adsorbents, ion exchange resins, solvents and process water.

4. Sustainable (bio) economic development (SED)

With the increased urgency for more SED by governments and so-
ciety in general, and stimulated by the introduction of carbon taxes and
legal emissions restrictions, the balance will shift to using less auxiliaries
and consequently to lower driving forces. For existing technologies, this
implies that higher CAPEX should be seen in this light and guide PI
principles of increased driving forces. This clear societal trend will also
favour new and emerging technologies with inherently lower auxiliary
materials and energy use.

Additionally, the SED trend will also emphasize ‘sustainable CAPEX’.

Fig. 3. Indicative impact of degree of process intensification on CAPEX and the
auxiliaries’ fraction in OPEX.
5. Contributions of CAPEX and AUX to OPEX in practise

As further evidence of our general observation to prioritise total OPEX reduction over PI’s central attention for CAPEX reduction, 2 concrete industrial cases of increasing complexity are presented. They relate to:

- concentrating aqueous product streams using membrane technology, such as ultrafiltration of proteins and nanofiltration/reversed osmosis of small molecules.
- production of cane ethanol and sugar in conventional Brazilian plants [27] and a hypothetical intensified ‘Biostil’ process in an identical environment and the same feedstock. In the ‘Biostil’ process, the inhibitory product ethanol is continuously and insitu removed, recycling the producing yeast to the fermenters operating at a close-to zero growth situation. The case includes a hypothetical 2nd generation extension of the existing (brown field) facility. This will improve the yield of products and feedstock utilisation, and reduce emissions.

5.1. Concentrating aqueous product streams using membrane technology

Membrane technology has widespread use in concentrating aqueous products in the manufacture of biotechnology products, food and potable water, as well as cell recycling. A majority of processes is concrete industrial cases of increasing complexity are presented. They stocks, reduced emissions and thus improved sustainability.

Table 1: Key numbers for selected biobased processes. Data from [24] unless indicated otherwise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPEX contribution</th>
<th>Mab</th>
<th>Insulin</th>
<th>Citric acid</th>
<th>Ethanol [27]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\text{kta - kton/yr}$</td>
<td>$\text{M$/yr$}$</td>
<td>$%$</td>
<td>$\text{M$/yr$}$</td>
<td>$%$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raw materials</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>61.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAPEX related</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor (other fixed)</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auxiliaries (AUX)</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>39.5</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total OPEX</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenue</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAPEX (in M$)</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main product(s)</td>
<td>1544</td>
<td>1800</td>
<td>kg/yr</td>
<td>kg/yr</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With that, it is implied that process equipment that is more durable can be modified and upgraded for new uses, and can be recycled in new and future plants. This will also lead to increased interest in ‘brown field’ developments, the partial or entire redevelopment of existing industrial sites for alternative uses. Clear examples are the various biorefinery initiatives with enhanced utilisation of residual streams, such as black liquor in pulp & paper, bagasse in the cane sugar and ethanol industry, and palm biomass in palm oil refineries. Here existing utilities can be used and expanded for processes that improve overall yield from feedstocks, reduced emissions and thus improved sustainability.

\[ N = k (\Delta P - \Delta \sigma) \]
\[ \phi_v = \frac{\rho \phi_m}{\rho} = A k (\Delta P - \Delta \sigma) \]  

The osmotic pressure of protein solutions can be as high as 2.5–5 bar, while for reversed osmosis of small molecules, osmotic pressures can be several tens of bars up to 100 bar in brines. Operating pressures need to exceed this value, so there is a minimum work requirement $W_{\text{min}}$ to create a system that is ‘ready to operate’ (comparable to complete reflux in distillation). The excess work beyond the minimum determines the rate of permeation or the level of process intensification, and is lost during permeation (i.e. converted in low temperature heat).

\[ W_{\text{lost}} = A k (\Delta P - \pi) \]

The lost work is the energetic price to pay for intensification. The lost work depends strongly on permeation rate and thus on the nett pressure difference. The higher the level of process intensification, the higher is the lost work. This becomes critical for modern reversed osmosis membranes that can operate at pressures as high as 250 bar, where electrical pumping energy costs can become excessive. Even though membrane separations can operate at lower energy costs per unit of product than concentrating techniques that rely on phase change (with inherently high heats of evaporation), large scale purification of potable water from sea of brackish water is still favoured by multi-effect evaporation.

The case is analyzed for enlarged productivity by intensified driving force $\Delta_1 = (\Delta p_{1} - \pi)$ for a fixed membrane area. Fig. 4 shows the ratio of OPEX per unit product (CAPEX/\phi_v) for intensified (1) and benchmark (0) situations versus the ratio in nett driving forces $\Delta_1/\Delta_2$, as well as the ratios of minimum and lost work versus the same. The ratio in driving forces for ultrafiltration of protein solutions is based on a representative osmotic pressure of 2.5 bar and a working range of actual pressures of up to 25 bar, and for reversed osmosis on an osmotic pressure of 25 bar (seawater) and a working pressure range up to 250 bar, which is the
5.2. Ethanol case: comparing conventional, intensified and lignocellulosic plants

The general principle as illustrated in Fig. 3 applies to many industrial-scale processes. Here the specific case is illustrated of ethanol and sugar manufacturing from sugar cane as described by [27].

5.2.1. Conventional plant

The 2005 benchmark process of 5 million tonnes of sugar cane is a typical commercial scale ethanol and sugar plant. The process design and associated techno-economic evaluation is elaborated in significant detail. They were verified with the Brazilian sugar and ethanol industry players and follow common protocols accepted in the international chemical and fuels industries. The base case considers ethanol and sugar manufacturing while selling excess electrical power to the grid.

5.2.2. Lignocellulosic plant

The report also includes a process design following the same approach for a so-called ‘bolt-on’ lignocellulosic facility using sugar cane bagasse as a 2nd generation feedstock, projected 10 years into the then-future (2015). The design bears many similarities with the actually implemented [28] GranBio lignocellulosic ethanol plant in Lagoa, Brazil, as well as with the corn stover based facility of [29] DSM POET in Emmetsburg (USA), both launched around 2015. Published data and investments confirm those anticipated in the study of [27]. The 2015 facility follows, in the reasoning of this study, the path of process integration utilising factory-based residuals of the original benchmark plant, with further steps in energy integration taken. Note that significantly less bagasse is combusted, and CAPEX of the cogeneration unit is halved.

5.2.3. ‘Biostil’ plant

In parallel, the economic and emission numbers are estimated of a hypothetical process intensified plant, that follows the so-called ‘Biostil’ [30,31] concept. Here ethanol as a inhibitory fermentation product is removed in situ by distillation from the fermentation broth, after the microbial biomass has been separated and recycled to the fermentors. The central fermentors effectively operate at a lower ethanol concentration, hence with less inhibitory effect, increasing ethanol production rate and thus lowering the fermentor volume and CAPEX.

There are more projected benefits of the Biostil concept, such as closed process water loop by feeding concentrated molasses or starch to the facility, operation at high substrate concentrations and therefore reduced (halved) stillage volume. The closed water cycle actually also leads to a build-up of contaminants in the feedstock, especially those that are not volatile such as salts and solids. This results in a high osmotic pressure that is partially inhibitory to the production organism (yeast) and potentially leads to undesired formation of glycerol as byproduct, but also effectively prevents bacterial contamination. In terms of overall performance, the intensified ‘Biostil’ version of the process can now be compared to the 2005 Conventional Plant and the 2015 Lignocellulosic base case. In reality, ‘Biostil’ has been explored for the Brazilian ethanol sector but does not seem to have led to successful implementations. We are not aware of actual commercial plants operating on a sugar cane feedstock.

For all relevant details, as well as ASPEN (Advanced System for Process Engineering) and SuperProDesign based calculations and underlying assumptions, reference should be made to the original report [27]. In Table 2, a summary of a number of key technical and economic numbers for the 3 plant designs is presented.

5.3. Comparing base case, intensified case and lignocellulosic plants

It is realised that only the benchmark (2005) plant is reasonably verified, and that the intensified and lignocellulosic versions are speculative. However, comparing those to literature reports of comparable (but not equal) commercial units, it is felt that the results in Table 2 give a reasonable first insight that supports our general view, developed on the basis of more simple cases.

The benchmark plant under 2005 conditions has a positive economic profile with a 17 % RoI. Actual CAPEX in Brazil are lower given the large scale at which ethanol plants have been constructed. The numbers in Table 2 are based on US and North European practices, and the translation (in 2005) has shown a location factor of approximately 40 %. However, since all CAPEX and OPEX models are based on US and EU references, they have been employed here. It shows the typical characteristics of commodity processes, such as a domination of the raw materials costs (60 %) of the OPEX. It should be recognised that the plant design includes inherently its own utilities, since power and steam production are based on the residues of the feedstock bagasse through the cogeneration unit.

The core processes are distinguished of the sugar cane conversion to main products sugar and ethanol and the utilities-related section of CAPEX which is close to half of the fixed capital cost. Hence, AUX includes the capital costs associated with the utilities (steam and power) while the rest of CAPEX is allocated to core process. Under this assumption, AUX is approximately 13 % of OPEX whereas the rest of CAPEX charges around 11 % of OPEX. Note that the CoGen (cogeneration) unit is significantly oversized due to the historic need to dispose of the enormous annual bagasse streams as residuals of the sugar extraction. It is now converted to sustainable electricity and sold to the grid, yielding a $10/m revenue contribution.
When translating the benchmark design to the intensified Biostil plant, the reported intensifications of reduced volumes of fermentation (due to lower ethanol inhibition) and stillage (use of concentrated feedstock and recycling of process water) were included. Halving of the volumes was assumed and translated with the appropriate scale factors to the reduced CAPEX. The price to pay is using part of the excess steam and electricity from the CoGen for the associated additional work: recycle flows as well as increased reboiler duties. This is at the expense of selling excess power to the electricity grid, so it is assumed that half of the additional energy demand was needed and consequently electricity revenue is halved. Also in the process intensified case, the lignocellulosic plant still has a power excess to be sold to the grid. Therefore in the final economic comparison, the altered revenue contributions are also taken into account. This results in a lower margin, even though CAPEX was also slightly reduced, resulting in a slight reduction of RoI (16.1%) relative to the benchmark plant (17%).

In conclusion, this form of PI does not work so well.

In the history of development of sugar cane ethanol (and sugar), inefficient combustion of bagasse was installed to dispose of the bagasse volumes. The CoGen unit helped to convert bagasse into a desired product, renewable electricity, that serves the growing Brazilian energy demand. But through today’s eyes, a conversion of the gate-delivered/ preprocessed carbon source merits a better fate than conversion to renewable electricity, such as to renewable liquid fuels and chemical products [7,31]. The lignocellulosic plant (2015) is designed with the 2005 insights to convert part of the lignocellulosic feedstock into more valuable liquid biofuels such as ethanol and even purchase electricity from the grid confirms this viewpoint.

This implies additional investments in the associated pretreatment and hydrolysis infrastructure as well as scaling up ethanol production and purification. This also has an impact on the energy demand of the plant in terms of steam and power requirements. The 2015 design was made such that the steam requirements of the plant were covered, and the shortage of power was purchased from the grid. CAPEX related to Cogen unit was more than halved. At the price levels used (2005), this is shown to be economic. Obviously, CAPEX is significantly increased, but the design projects significantly improved margin and a 60% higher RoI (25.8%) relative to benchmark.

These results once more emphasize the need to focus on yield increase and reduction of auxiliaries in the OPEX, in addition to or even beyond process intensification options.
6. In conclusion

Process intensification offers opportunities to reduce capital costs in industrial plants. While this will provide interesting alternatives to today's practices, this trend underestimates the potential increases in operational costs. In a number of cases, it could be demonstrated that the increases in OPEX due to intensification outweigh the economic advantages of process intensification. A more fundamental analysis using irreversible thermodynamics indicates an inherent origin of the observation, and thus potentially a wider impact. If this is the case, a more OPEX-centric emphasis in support of a sustainable (bio)economic development is anticipated.

It is important to evidence these observations further, by means of additional and wider cases studies of industrial relevance, indicating in which cases the impacts of PI match the OPEX penalties. With a planet realising more and more the need to sustainable (bio) economic development, it is time for a holistic bioprocess integration methodology bundling together techno-economic and broader societal impacts, especially on environment.

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