Significant progress in CIGS thin-solar cell technology reported at IWCGSTech7


Photovoltaic modules with CIGS absorbers are very effective in converting light directly into electricity. Due to their specific advantages CIGS thin-film modules are among the most promising photovoltaic technologies. Many companies and institutions worldwide contribute to this development with diversified approaches. An efficient exchange of know-how is essential to move the technology forward. In June 2016, the IW-CIGSTech workshop was organized for the seventh consecutive year in Munich. In the workshop, representatives from industry and academia gathered to discuss the latest developments in the fast-developing field of CIGS (Cu(In,Ga)(Se,S)2) based solar cells. As a result of last year’s workshop, a joint, community-wide effort resulted in the publication of the “White Paper for CIGS thin film solar cell technology” [1]. In this article, we provide a brief impression of the progress and challenges reported in this year’s workshop.

Record efficiencies

Over the past few years, record efficiencies have improved at an impressive rate and are catching up with crystalline silicon technology. Presenting a new world record, Stefan Pauel from ZSW in Stuttgart, Germany, reported on his institute’s latest certified record value of 22.6%. With his colleagues from the EU-sponsored SHARE25 consortium, he outlined the roadmap 25% efficiency values on a lab scale. Similarly ambitious targets were reported by Shigeru Niki from Japan’s AIST, who leads a NEDO-sponsored consortium working on CIGS. Based on Solar Frontier’s sequential deposition technology (22.3% certified record cell), and AIST’s in-house co-evaporation technology, 20% mini-module efficiency is aimed for by 2019, paving the way for electricity costs of $14/JPY ($0.135) per kW in 2020 and $7 by 2030.

Prof. Sun from Nankai University in China presented an overview of academic and industrial developments in China. Several research labs are working on CIGS cells and modules on flexible substrates and glass, with cell efficiencies already above 20%. Reporting on experience with improved yield from CIGS PV plants compared to Si, as well as on production expansion plans from companies such as CNBM and Hanergy, he expects the breakthrough of CIGS industrialization within the next 10 years.

Products and technology perspective

An important focus of the workshop was on production issues. The diversification of the production and design of CIGS modules offers multiple possibilities for PV power systems in the future. CIGS glass-glass products cover the classical application fields of power plants, rooftops and building facades. Even though this efficient thin-film technology can be produced on a variety of substrates, glass-based modules dominate the discussion, as was reported by Takuya Kato from Solar Frontier, Robert Lechner from Avancis and Olle Lundberg from Solibro. Full-size modules from the main players have all reached champion efficiencies in the range of 16%, independent of production technology. Several large-scale production sites are running in Japan and Germany, and several more are planned and under construction in China. At the same time, flexible and lightweight CIGS modules currently in production show impressive output area efficiencies of ≥16% as well, as reported by Miasole’s Aiyte Bayman. Achieving high efficiency with such products will open new large-scale applications and consumer markets. A variety of substrates and module designs were presented by Global Solar (Urs Schoep reported) and Miasole, both within the Hanergy group, as well as by Switzerland based Flisom.

Proven reliability and performance

Glass-glass CIGS modules with monolithic series connection of the individual cells demonstrate inherently superior stability over soldered or bonded cell strings. At present, CIGS modules from mass production guarantee a high level of reliability proven by extensive endurance and long-term field tests in numerous installations and climatic conditions with independent verification [2]. A low temperature coefficient, a favourable spectral response and high efficiency under low light conditions are the reason for excellent energy yields and hence low levelized costs of electricity under most climatic conditions. Furthermore, the specific design of thin-film module based on monolithic interconnection of cells across the entire substrate results in an intrinsically reduced sensitivity to detrimental effects caused by shading.

Following a long tradition of CIGS Technology since the last century, Stion’s Alexander Schwarz presented impressive data of performance, reliability and stability of modules in the field. These data and similar long-term studies presented by Solibro indicated that CIGS is outperforming c-Si at most geographical locations.

Developments at the GW production level

Currently the biggest production units, ranging in capacity from 100 to 1,000MWp per year, are located in Germany, the US and in Japan. In China, groundbreaking factories of hundreds of megawatts in size have already taken place and further operations in the gigawatt range are planned. These are operated at high yields with low equipment values. Although companies use different fabrication methods, all of them show excellent results, demonstrating that CIGS production technology has reached the first stage of industrial maturity. Even when using non-abundant elements like Indium, a supply limitation is not expected at any planned and projected production volume. This is due to the continuous reduction of the amounts of Indium needed in combination with properties of CIGS and low production costs of US$0.4/Wp are already projected even for low capacities of 150MW, with further reductions of 25-40% expected by improving module efficiencies and exploiting scaling effects on materials cost and capex for multi-gigawatt fabs. Nevertheless, further cost-reduction potential is expected within the next decade if supported by continued, effective R&D activities.

For production lines on a gigawatt level, equipment manufacturers play a key role. The tolerance of the CIGS absorber material allows a wide scope of process techniques to be exploited. Kay Orgassa from Manz gave an update on the further development of Manz’s well known co-evaporation-based CIGS fab. Next to further improvement in module efficiency and line yield, he reported on experiments on how to transfer the highly successful lab-scale alkali Post Deposition Treatment (PDT) into production. Dirk Reinenberg from Singulus gave an overview of his company’s core sequential CIGS processing technologies: precursor sputtering, Se deposition, rapid thermal processing (RTP) ovens and buffer processes. He also showed how this equipment was scaled up towards GW scale production levels, even for the low capacities of 150kWp, with further reductions by 10-20% expected for higher capacity levels. Sebastian Schmidt from the Helmholtz Zentrum Berlin explained his company’s work to develop high-efficiency, high-throughput RTP equipment, with the key feature that it operates at atmospheric pressure (based on a Smit Thermal Solution system). The huge future potential of CIGS
Thin Film technology was demonstrated in the oral and poster presentations by research institutes from a.o. Switzerland, France, Japan, the Netherlands, Luxemburg, China and Germany. Recent results of material modifications and device optimization, such as those presented by Daniel Lincot from IPVF (France), revealed the still enormous room for further efficiency developments. In the longer term, in combination with suitable wide bandgap absorbers (e.g. Perovskites), CIGS can be used as a bottom cell in tandem devices that enable efficiency values well beyond 30%, as was outlined in the presentation by Stephan Buecheler from EMPA (Switzerland). This demonstrates impressively that not only is CIGS a competitive PV technology, but in addition it comprises a potential not yet exploited for further improvements.

Still, there are some clear challenges facing the CIGS community as a whole. Most importantly, a lack of standardization in process equipment, product size, quality control and in-house testing procedures so far prevent CIGS technology from reaping the full economy-of-scale benefit. Therefore, in the course of IWCIGSTech 7, major players of the industry and its suppliers as well as research institutions agreed to build on the initial joint effort of the White Paper. They intend to cooperate more closely in future, for example by sharing information on joint technical issues, providing up-to-date ecological footprint data, developing a CIGS technology roadmap and keeping the public up to date on the advantages of the CIGS technology.

In summary, the IWCIGSTech7 workshop presentations gave a concise and impressive insight into the present status and future potential of CIGS technology. Due to its continued success in gathering the vast majority of technological actors in the field, the community-driven IWCIGSTech workshop is certain to see its next version in 2017.

References

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