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Direct synthesis of polycarbonate diols from atmospheric flow CO<sub>2</sub> and diols without using dehydrating agents

Polycarbonate diols were directly synthesized from diols and CO<sub>2</sub> over a heterogeneous CeO<sub>2</sub> catalyst, and high yields (up to 92%) of target polycarbonate diols were obtained. CeO<sub>2</sub> exhibited its unique catalytic activity towards the reaction under atmospheric pressure, and the efficient removal of the coproduced water by gas stripping with the CO<sub>2</sub> flow reaction system was vital to overcoming the thermodynamic limitation. The process can be an environmentally friendly alternative to the conventional processes using toxic phosgene and CO as raw materials.

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## Direct synthesis of polycarbonate diols from atmospheric flow CO<sub>2</sub> and diols without using dehydrating agents†

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Polymer synthesis with CO<sub>2</sub> as a C1 chemical has attracted much attention from the viewpoint of green chemistry. The direct transformation of CO<sub>2</sub> and diols into polycarbonate diols is promising as an alternative method to the hazardous phosgene process, however, challenging due to the inert characteristic of CO<sub>2</sub> and thermodynamic limitation. Herein, we present the direct synthesis of polycarbonate diols from atmospheric pressure CO<sub>2</sub> and  $\alpha,\omega$ -diols using a heterogeneous CeO<sub>2</sub> catalyst and a CO<sub>2</sub> flow semi-batch reactor. The target alternating polycarbonate diol from CO<sub>2</sub> and 1,6-hexanediol was obtained with high yield (92%) and selectivity (97%) without using any dehydrating agents. Activation of atmospheric pressure CO<sub>2</sub> by a CeO<sub>2</sub> catalyst and the shift of equilibrium towards the product by removing the coproduced water (gas stripping) are responsible for the high yield. The flow reaction system with a CeO<sub>2</sub> catalyst was applicable to the reactions of CO<sub>2</sub> and primary mono-alcohols or 1,2-diols, giving the target organic carbonates in high selectivity (>99%).

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### Introduction

The reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere is an urgent issue for mankind to achieve a sustainable society because of global warming and related problems such as abnormal weather, sea level rise, ecological system change, and so on. CO<sub>2</sub> is renewable, abundant, cheap, non-flammable and non-toxic, and the transformation of CO<sub>2</sub> as a C1 source into valuable chemicals is one of the promising strategies.<sup>1–5</sup> Various effective catalyst systems have been developed for the reductive transformation of CO<sub>2</sub> into methanol, CO, hydrocarbons, formic acid, *etc.*<sup>6–20</sup> and for the non-reductive transformation into organic carbonates, carbamates, ureas, and their polymers.<sup>20–47</sup> Organic carbonates such as dialkyl carbonates, cyclic carbonates, and polycarbonates are valuable chemicals and conventionally made by the phosgene process with problems such as the use of hazardous phosgene and dichloromethane, and the pro-

duction of waste salt from the reaction with sodium hydroxide.<sup>28–31</sup> The direct conversion of CO<sub>2</sub> with alcohols to the carbonates can be an ideal substitute because water is the only by-product, and the substrates are easily available and safe. However, the high yield synthesis of organic carbonates, especially polycarbonates, is difficult because of the low reactivity of CO<sub>2</sub> and low yield restricted by the equilibrium (Fig. 1).<sup>28–31,48</sup> CeO<sub>2</sub>-based catalysts have been reported to be effective heterogeneous ones for the reaction owing to the high potential for CO<sub>2</sub> activation and the equilibrium yields of the corresponding dialkyl carbonates were lower than 2% even with pressurized CO<sub>2</sub> up to 20 MPa.<sup>28–31</sup> It is reported that high CO<sub>2</sub> pressure is required for the spontaneous progress of the reaction (*e.g.*,  $\Delta G < 0$ ,  $P_{\text{CO}_2} > 2.41 \times 10^4$  MPa in the dimethyl carbonate synthesis at 353 K, theoretically).<sup>49</sup> Such enormous pressure is technically difficult and consequently, the coproduced water should be removed to shift the equilibrium to the product side. Various dehydration systems equipped with membranes,<sup>50,51</sup> physical adsorbents,<sup>41,52–55</sup> and chemical dehydrating agents<sup>56–68</sup> have been developed (Fig. 1). Membranes such as inorganic ceramic membranes and organic polymer membranes<sup>50,51</sup> and physical adsorbents such as molecular sieves<sup>52–55</sup> provided low yields of organic carbonates despite the high CO<sub>2</sub> pressure (0.4–30 MPa), and the low durability, regeneration treatment, and/or complex reaction system are also problematic. The synthesis combined with a reactive dehydration reaction using chemical dehydrat-

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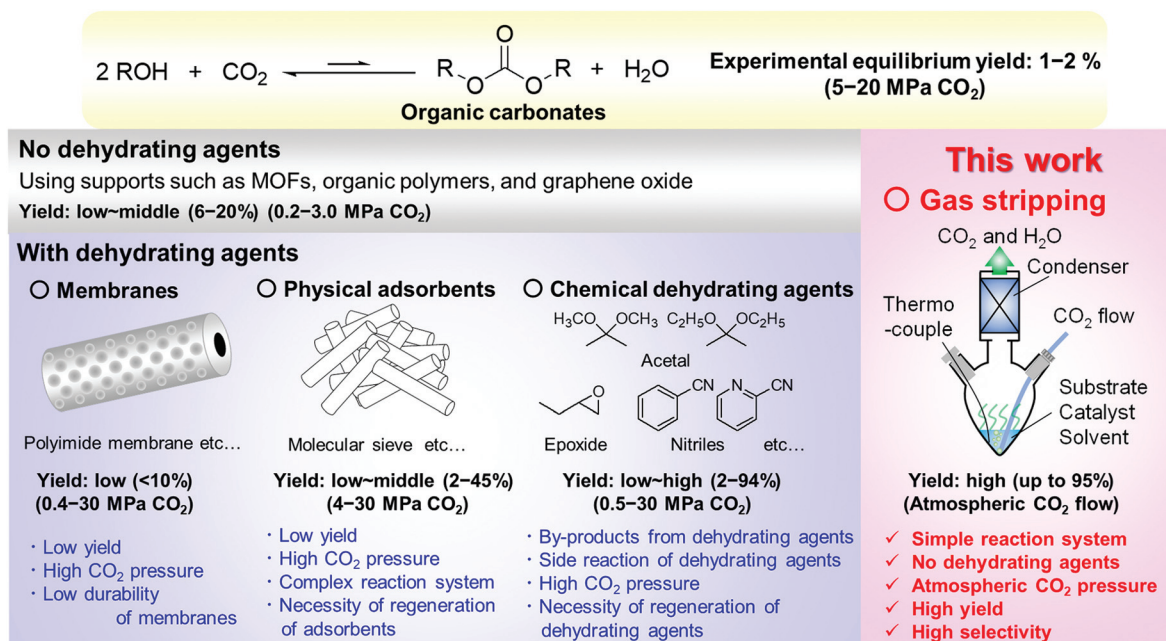


Fig. 1 Direct synthesis of organic carbonates from CO<sub>2</sub> and alcohols with/without dehydration systems and the strategy of this work.

ing agents such as nitriles, acetals, epoxides, ionic liquids, and so on has been regarded as effective systems.<sup>56–69</sup> A handful of dehydrating agents including 2-cyanopyridine,<sup>62–64</sup> cyanopyrazine,<sup>62,64</sup> and 2-furonitrile<sup>60</sup> with a CeO<sub>2</sub> catalyst enabled sufficient removal of water to shift the equilibrium to the product side and provided over 90% yield of dialkyl carbonates. Various problems for industrialization, however, remain unsolved, including the regeneration of the dehydrating agents, high CO<sub>2</sub> pressure, formation of dehydrating agent-derived by-products, and decomposition of dehydrating agents.<sup>56,59,60,64</sup> On the other hand, the synthesis of dialkyl carbonates from CO<sub>2</sub> and alcohols without using dehydrating agents has also been reported. Ti-Based and Cu–Ni-based MOFs and graphene oxide immobilized Cs<sub>2</sub>Mo<sub>6</sub>Br<sub>14</sub> provided 6–20% yield of the dialkyl carbonates,<sup>70–73</sup> and the catalysts themselves may play a role in H<sub>2</sub>O removal from the reaction system.<sup>31,72</sup>

Polymers are essential materials in our life, and the development of greener synthesis methods for them is indispensable to attain a sustainable society. In this context, the direct synthesis of polymers from CO<sub>2</sub> is a hot topic, and various effective reaction systems with suitable chemicals and/or catalysts have been developed: CO<sub>2</sub> can polymerize with cyclic ethers (epoxides and oxetanes) to polycarbonates,<sup>21–25,40</sup> alkenes or alkynes to polyesters,<sup>74–76</sup> dihalide and diols to polycarbonates,<sup>77,78</sup> diols to polycarbonates,<sup>59,60,79,80</sup> and diamines to polyureas,<sup>81–83</sup> and so on.<sup>84</sup> Polycarbonates are useful chemicals with high demand (4.3 million tons in 2015, and expected to reach 7.7 million tons by 2024<sup>85</sup>) as engineering plastics and intermediates for the production of polyurethanes. Polycarbonates have been conventionally produced by using phosgene, which has many drawbacks such as the high toxicity of phosgene, use of a large amount of

solvents and caustic sodium hydroxide, and formation of a large amount of waste salt by neutralization.<sup>25,59,85</sup> As an alternative method, the Asahi Kasei process was industrialized in 2012 using CO<sub>2</sub> as the carbonyl source, and the process is composed of four steps including the carbonate synthesis from ethylene oxide and CO<sub>2</sub>, and transesterification of carbonates and alcohols.<sup>86,87</sup> Considering the versatility, availability and handling ability of alcohols, the direct synthesis of polycarbonates from CO<sub>2</sub> and diols is a promising process. The atom efficiency of the reaction is higher than those of the reactions applied in other processes (direct process: 94%, phosgene process: 63%, Asahi Kasei transesterification process: 81% in the case of bis(6-hydroxyhexyl)carbonate synthesis from CO<sub>2</sub> and 1,6-hexanediol. Formulas are shown in Fig. S1†). Despite the theoretical advantages, the reaction of CO<sub>2</sub> and diols has only been reported with additional reagents: alkyl α,ω-dihalides were used as a co-reactant with CO<sub>2</sub> and diols under 1 MPa CO<sub>2</sub>, affording polycarbonates with an *M<sub>n</sub>* of 22 000 g mol<sup>−1</sup>.<sup>77</sup> A CeO<sub>2</sub> catalyst with nitrile dehydrating agents such as 2-cyanopyridine and 2-furonitrile was also reported to be effective for the polymerization of CO<sub>2</sub> and α,ω-diols under 5 MPa CO<sub>2</sub>, producing the polycarbonates with *M<sub>n</sub>* values lower than 6000 g mol<sup>−1</sup> due to the nitrile-related side reactions (a detailed comparison of these works is shown in Table S1†).<sup>59,60,79,80</sup> The high pressure of CO<sub>2</sub> and use of dihalides and nitriles are not preferable and the development of a practical and hazardous reagent-free process for the synthesis of polycarbonate diols from low-pressure CO<sub>2</sub> and diols is highly required.

Gas stripping is a separation process, wherein a gas passes through a liquid mixture to selectively remove some components with lower boiling points from the liquid phase.<sup>88,89</sup> As for the synthesis of polycarbonate diols from CO<sub>2</sub> and diols,



the boiling points of diols and the target polycarbonate diols can be adequately higher than that of H<sub>2</sub>O, and flowing CO<sub>2</sub> will serve as a reactant as well as a stripper for the removal of the coproduced water. Therefore, we envisioned that a high yield of target polycarbonate diols can be obtained by selectively removing the coproduced water from the reaction media by gas stripping with CO<sub>2</sub> flow and shifting the equilibrium to the product side if diols can react with atmospheric pressure CO<sub>2</sub> by using an appropriate catalyst. It is necessary to precisely control the reaction conditions such as reaction temperature, solvents, CO<sub>2</sub> flow rate, and so on to decrease the water concentration of the reaction media to a low level.

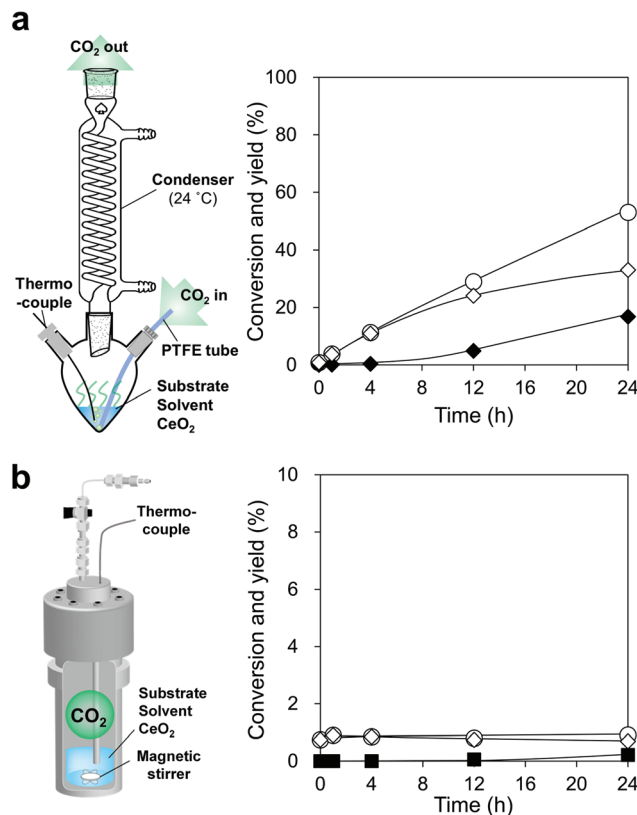
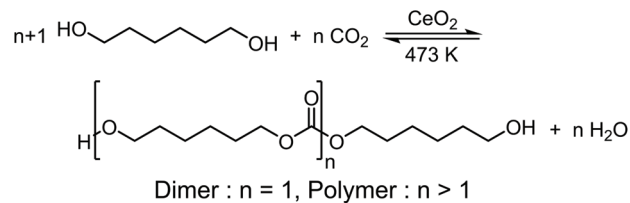
Herein, we found that the combination of a CeO<sub>2</sub> catalyst and CO<sub>2</sub> flow reaction setup with gas stripping was an effective reaction system for the direct synthesis of polycarbonate diols from atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> and diols.

## Results and discussion

### Application of a CO<sub>2</sub> flow semi-batch reactor in the reaction of 1,6-hexanediol and CO<sub>2</sub> over CeO<sub>2</sub>

We commenced with the reaction of 1,6-hexanediol and flow CO<sub>2</sub> at atmospheric pressure over CeO<sub>2</sub>, which is a well-known catalyst for this type of reaction as mentioned above, in triethylene glycol dimethyl ether (triglyme) solvent at 473 K by using a CO<sub>2</sub> flow semi-batch reactor (Fig. 2a, the details of the reactor are shown in Fig. S2†). The boiling points of 1,6-hexanediol (522 K) and triglyme solvent (489 K) are higher than the reaction temperature of 473 K, however, their vaporization under the gas flow conditions leads to material loss. A condenser was connected to the outlet of the flask and the temperature was set to 297 K to trap the vaporized substrate and solvent in the gas flow. Triglyme was selected as a solvent because it can dissolve 1,6-hexanediol, and the solidified 1,6-hexanediol (melting point: 315 K) at the condenser was rinsed away with the trapped triglyme. The reaction of flow CO<sub>2</sub> and 1,6-hexanediol proceeded smoothly to reach 50% yield in 24 h with a high diol balance (>99%) (Fig. 2a). The corresponding dimer, bis(6-hydroxyhexyl) carbonate, was formed as the sole product until 4 h, and the formation of the polymer, which is defined as a trimer and further polymerized products in this paper, appeared at a longer reaction time. The water content in the reaction media measured by coulometric Karl-Fischer titration (Fig. S3†) was below the detection limit (<4 ppm), suggesting that the coproduced water was efficiently removed from the reaction media. The amount of the coproduced water at the initial 4 h is calculated to be 1.0 mmol (0.018 g) from the conversion. Assuming that all the coproduced water was diffused to the gas phase at a constant rate, the water concentration at a gas flow rate of 200 mL min<sup>-1</sup> can be estimated to be 0.38 g m<sup>-3</sup>, which is far below the water concentration of saturated water vapor at 297 K (condenser temperature), 22 g m<sup>-3</sup>. Therefore, the coproduced water in the gas flow cannot be trapped in the condenser.

To check the equilibrium level in a sealed batch reactor under atmospheric pressure CO<sub>2</sub>, 1,6-hexanediol was reacted



**Fig. 2** Reaction of CO<sub>2</sub> and 1,6-hexanediol over CeO<sub>2</sub> with two different reactors: (a) CO<sub>2</sub> flow semi-batch reactor and time-course under atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> flow and (b) sealed batch reactor and time-course under 7.5 MPa CO<sub>2</sub>. ○, Conversion; ◇, dimer yield; ◆, polymer yield; and ■, Others yield (Others include ester and ether). Reaction conditions: (a) CeO<sub>2</sub> 0.10 g, 1,6-hexanediol 2.0 g (17 mmol), triglyme 3 g, 473 K, CO<sub>2</sub> flow rate 200 mL min<sup>-1</sup>. (b) CeO<sub>2</sub> 0.10 g, 1,6-hexanediol 2.0 g (17 mmol), triglyme 3 g, 473 K, CO<sub>2</sub> 7.5 MPa, the detailed data are shown in Table S2.†

with 0.1 MPa of CO<sub>2</sub> in an autoclave reactor, giving the result that the formation amount of the target carbonate was below the detection limit (yield < 0.01%, Table S3†). Even in the reaction with high-pressure CO<sub>2</sub> (7.5 MPa) in the sealed batch reactor (Fig. 2b), the conversion was low and became constant at 0.9% (4–24 h) with a dimer produced as the main product. These results indicate that the equilibrium yield at high CO<sub>2</sub> pressure (7.5 MPa) is about 1%, and the equilibrium yield with atmospheric pressure CO<sub>2</sub> at 473 K in the sealed batch reactor can be estimated to be below 0.01%. The water content of the reaction mixture in the sealed batch reactor under 7.5 MPa was 600–700 ppm (Fig. S3†), which was mainly from the water impurity of the reagents and the coproduced H<sub>2</sub>O from the carbonate formation. The water amount was clearly higher than



that in the CO<sub>2</sub> flow semi-batch reactor. As a result, the conversion in the CO<sub>2</sub> flow semi-batch reactor largely exceeded the equilibrium level, which is hardly achievable in a sealed-batch reactor without dehydrating agents. As above, the coproduced water in the CO<sub>2</sub> flow semi-batch reactor can be removed from the reaction media, leading to high conversion and yields by shifting the chemical equilibrium to the product side.

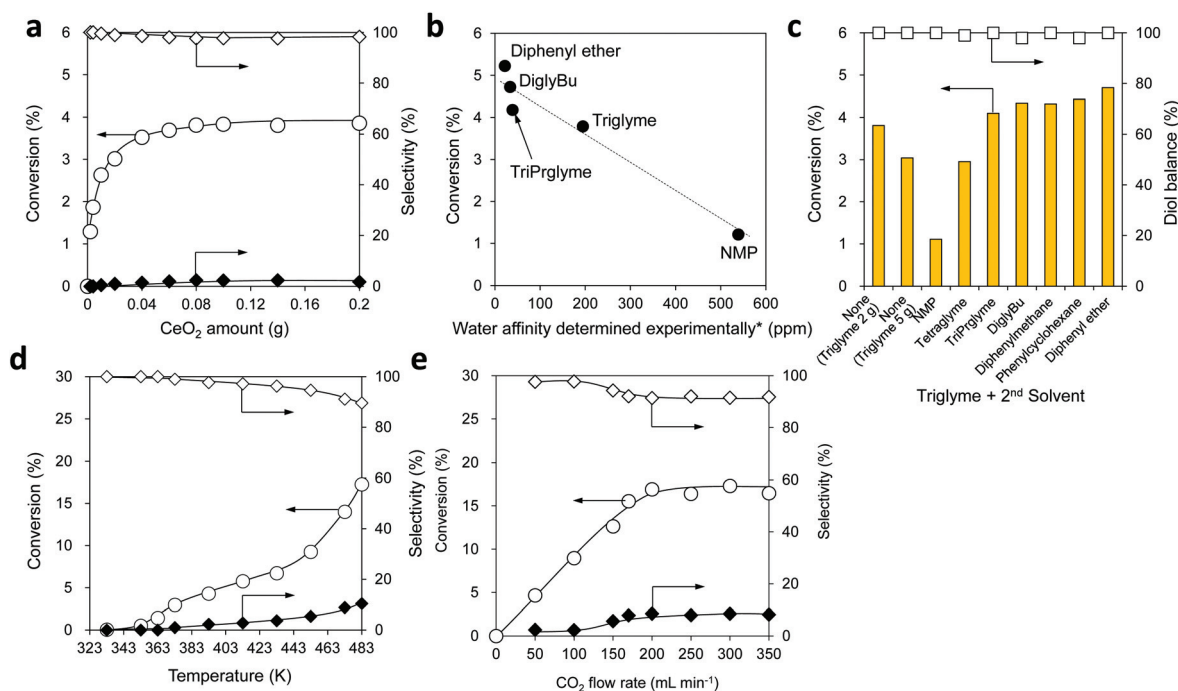
### Effect of reaction parameters on the reaction of 1,6-hexanediol and CO<sub>2</sub> in a CO<sub>2</sub> flow semi-batch reactor

To confirm the specificity of CeO<sub>2</sub> for the reaction in a CO<sub>2</sub> flow semi-batch reactor, the reactions without a catalyst and with various solid oxides were carried out (Table S4<sup>†</sup>). No products were detected without using a catalyst (yield < 0.01%). CeO<sub>2</sub> exhibited excellent catalytic activity towards the reaction of flow CO<sub>2</sub> and 1,6-hexanediol under atmospheric pressure, giving 17% conversion of the diol and >99% selectivity to organic carbonate species including the dimer and the polymer. In the cases of  $\gamma$ -Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> and SiO<sub>2</sub>-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, there were no carbonate products, while linear and cyclic ethers of 1,6-hexanediol were produced as major products with 5-hexen-1-ol and its isomers as minor products. The strong acidity of these catalysts is reported to be responsible for their catalytic activity.<sup>90–92</sup> Other metal oxides used in the experiments were inactive, and no products were obtained. The initial formation rate of the dimer with

CeO<sub>2</sub> was found to be 15 mmol g<sub>cat</sub><sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup> (Fig. S4<sup>†</sup>), which is adequately high compared with the previous reports (0.1–11 mmol g<sub>cat</sub><sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup>) using organic dehydrating agents except for the cases with 2-cyanopyridine (75 mmol g<sub>cat</sub><sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup>),<sup>28</sup> CCl<sub>3</sub>COOMe (70 mmol g<sub>cat</sub><sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup>),<sup>28</sup> and 2,2-diethoxypropane (44 mmol g<sub>cat</sub><sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup>).<sup>61</sup> Therefore, the catalyst system is quite meaningful from the practical viewpoint.

Various reaction parameters were investigated in the same reaction (Fig. 3). The conversion at 1 h was plotted as a function of the CeO<sub>2</sub> amount (Fig. 3a), showing that the conversion increased with the increase of the CeO<sub>2</sub> amount in the range of 0–0.08 g and reached 3.8% in this range. The reaction progress was controlled by the catalyst amount in the range of 0–0.08 g, indicating that the rate-determining factor is the catalytic activity of CeO<sub>2</sub> in the reaction of 1,6-hexanediol with CO<sub>2</sub>. With larger amounts of CeO<sub>2</sub> from 0.08 to 0.20 g, the conversion became constant at 3.8%, indicating that the rate-determining factor here is the removal of water from the reaction media.

Next, the solvent effect on the reaction was investigated with an adequate amount of the CeO<sub>2</sub> catalyst (0.10 g). The reaction under the neat conditions provided a similar conversion to the previous case, however, the diol balance decreased to 87%, and the solidified 1,6-hexanediol was observed in the condenser (Fig. S5 and S6<sup>†</sup>), leading to a block of the flow line at a longer reaction time. Other solvents with high boiling



**Fig. 3** Effect of reaction parameters: (a) CeO<sub>2</sub> amount, (b) relationship between the water affinity of solvents and the conversion, (c) solvent effect, (d) reaction temperature, and (e) CO<sub>2</sub> flow rate. Marks in (a), (d) and (e): ○, Conversion; ◇, dimer selectivity; and ◆, polymer selectivity. Mark and bar in (c): □, Diol balance; bar, conversion. \*The ability of solvents to retain water under the reaction conditions. Reaction conditions: (a) CeO<sub>2</sub> 0–0.20 g, 1,6-hexanediol 2.0 g (17 mmol), triglyme 3 g, CO<sub>2</sub> flow rate 200 mL min<sup>-1</sup>, 473 K, 1 h. (b) CeO<sub>2</sub> 0.10 g, 1,6-hexanediol 2.0 g (17 mmol), solvent 3 g, CO<sub>2</sub> flow rate 200 mL min<sup>-1</sup>, 473 K, 1 h. (c) CeO<sub>2</sub> 0.10 g, 1,6-hexanediol 2.0 g (17 mmol), triglyme 2 g, 2<sup>nd</sup> solvent 0 or 3 g, CO<sub>2</sub> flow rate 200 mL min<sup>-1</sup>, 473 K, 1 h. (d) CeO<sub>2</sub> 0.10 g, 1,6-hexanediol 2.0 g (17 mmol), triglyme 2 g, diphenyl ether 3 g, CO<sub>2</sub> flow rate 200 mL min<sup>-1</sup>, 333–483 K, 4 h. (e) CeO<sub>2</sub> 0.10 g, 1,6-hexanediol 2.0 g (17 mmol), triglyme 2 g, diphenyl ether 3 g, CO<sub>2</sub> flow rate 0–350 mL min<sup>-1</sup>, 483 K, 4 h.



points including *N*-methyl-2-pyrrolidone (NMP), tetraethylene glycol dimethyl ether (tetraglyme), tripropylene glycol dimethyl ether (isomer mixture, triPrglyme), diethylene glycol dibutyl ether (diglyBu), diphenylmethane, phenylcyclohexane, and diphenyl ether were applied to the reaction. The solvents with low solubility in water ( $\leq 2 \text{ g L}^{-1}\text{-H}_2\text{O}$ ) including diglyBu, diphenylmethane, phenylcyclohexane, and diphenyl ether, provided higher conversion (4.7–5.2%) to the carbonates than triglyme (Fig. S5†). However, the solidification of 1,6-hexanediol occurred in the condenser due to their poor ability to dissolve 1,6-hexanediol (Table S5†), resulting in a lower diol balance (90–97%) and a difficulty in the prolonged reaction similar to the case of the neat conditions. On the other hand, the reactions with triglyme or tetraglyme that are miscible with water provided a higher diol balance (>99%) and adequate conversion (3.8%).

We estimated the ability of the solvents to retain water under the same reaction conditions by addition of water (0.10 g) in NMP, triglyme, triPrglyme, diglyBu, and diphenyl ether solvents, and the retained water amount in the solvent is called water affinity determined experimentally (Fig. 3b, *x*-axis, the detailed method is described in the ESI†). The solvents with lower solubility in water (diphenyl ether,  $<1 \text{ g L}^{-1}\text{-H}_2\text{O}$ ; diglyBu,  $2 \text{ g L}^{-1}\text{-H}_2\text{O}$ ; triPrglyme,  $280 \text{ g L}^{-1}\text{-H}_2\text{O}$ ) exhibited lower water affinity, and NMP, which is miscible with water and a highly polar aprotic solvent, showed higher water affinity. The conversion of the reaction of 1,6-hexanediol and  $\text{CO}_2$  at 1 h was plotted as a function of the water affinity (Fig. 3b), showing a good relationship between the water affinity and conversion; the conversion decreased with higher water affinity. These results indicate that solvents with lower water affinity can promote the removal of water from the reaction media.

To achieve both high conversion and good diol balance, we studied a dual-solvent reaction system with a 2nd solvent in combination with triglyme (1st solvent) (Fig. 3c). The addition of NMP, which has higher water affinity, gave much lower conversion (1.1%) than that in the case of using 2 g of triglyme alone (3.8%), and the increase of the triglyme amount or combination with tetraglyme as a 2nd solvent also showed lower conversions (3.0%). The addition of solvents with lower water affinity such as triPrglyme, diglyBu, diphenylmethane, phenylcyclohexane, and diphenyl ether as a 2nd solvent gave higher conversion (4.1–4.7%) than that with triglyme alone (3.8%). Since diphenyl ether as a 2nd solvent provided higher conversion (4.7%) than the other solvents, diphenyl ether was selected as a 2nd solvent in combination with triglyme in an optimized ratio (2 g of triglyme and 3 g of diphenyl ether, Fig. S7 and S8†) and used in the subsequent experiments.

The effect of reaction temperature was investigated with an adequate amount of  $\text{CeO}_2$  (0.10 g) in the range between 333 and 483 K, which is below the boiling point of the 1st solvent, triglyme (489 K) (Fig. 3d). The conversion increased with an increase in the reaction temperature from 333 K to 483 K, and production of the polymer was observed when the conversion exceeded 3% at temperatures above 373 K. The results suggest that a higher reaction temperature facilitates the removal of

water from the reaction media, which shifts the equilibrium to the product side to result in higher conversion.

The effect of the  $\text{CO}_2$  flow rate was investigated in the presence of an adequate  $\text{CeO}_2$  amount (0.10 g) (Fig. 3e). The conversion increased almost linearly with the increase of the  $\text{CO}_2$  flow rate from 0 to  $200 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$  and became constant at 17% when the flow rate was above  $200 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ . From the results, a  $\text{CO}_2$  flow rate of  $200 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$  was selected for the subsequent synthesis of polycarbonate diol.

The effect of the mixed gas flow of  $\text{CO}_2$  and  $\text{N}_2$  was studied in the presence of an adequate amount of  $\text{CeO}_2$  (0.10 g) (Fig. 4, left side, the detailed results are shown in Table S6†). The flow rate of  $\text{CO}_2$  was fixed to  $70 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$  and the total flow rate was changed from 70 to  $250 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$  by  $\text{N}_2$  flow. The conversions were not changed at any flow rates ( $70\text{--}250 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ ). The behaviour is different from that with pure  $\text{CO}_2$  flow (Fig. 4, right side, the detailed results are shown in Table S7†), where the higher  $\text{CO}_2$  flow rate provided higher conversion in the range of  $70\text{--}200 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ . These results indicate that the gas flow rate does not contribute to the removal of water, which can be explained by the low water concentration in the gas flow ( $0.38 \text{ g m}^{-3}$ ). A possible interpretation of the results is that a higher  $\text{CO}_2$  flow rate increased the concentration of  $\text{CO}_2$  in the reaction media, helping the equilibrium shift to the product side and afford higher conversion.

Fig. 5 shows the effect of the 1,6-hexanediol concentration on the reaction at 483 K. The  $\text{CeO}_2$  amount was decreased to 0.03 g, where the rate-determining step is the reaction over  $\text{CeO}_2$ , not the removal of water to shift the equilibrium (Fig. 3a). The conversion increased with an increase in the 1,6-hexanediol concentration at lower concentrations from 0.9 to 2.4 M (Fig. 5), and the selectivity to the dimer slightly decreased as it was polymerized into the polymer. At higher concentrations from 2.4 to 4.9 M, the conversion and selectivities were almost the same, suggesting that the adsorption of

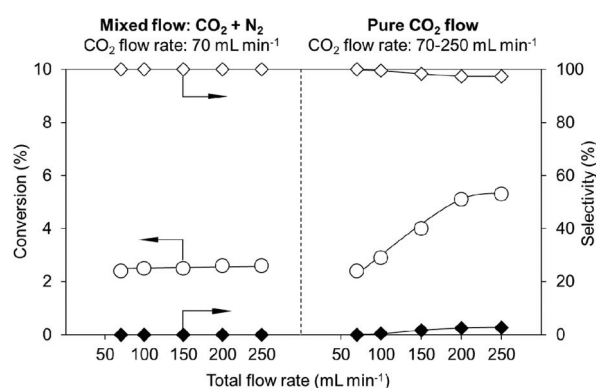
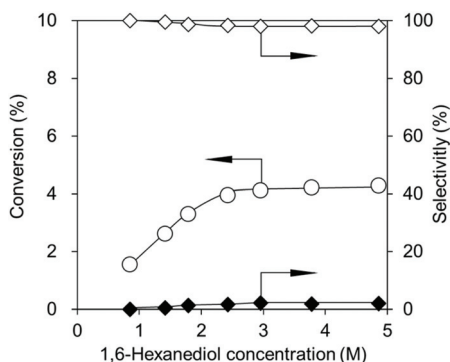


Fig. 4 Effect of mixed gas flow of  $\text{CO}_2$  and  $\text{N}_2$  in the reaction of flow  $\text{CO}_2$  and 1,6-hexanediol with a  $\text{CeO}_2$  catalyst. Reaction conditions:  $\text{CeO}_2$  0.10 g, 1,6-hexanediol 2.0 g (17 mmol), triglyme 2 g, diphenyl ether 3 g,  $\text{CO}_2$  flow rate  $70 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$  [compensated with  $\text{N}_2$  (0–180  $\text{mL min}^{-1}$ ), left graph];  $\text{CO}_2$  flow rate  $70\text{--}250 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$  (right graph), 483 K, 1 h.  $\circ$ , Conversion;  $\diamond$ , dimer selectivity; and  $\blacklozenge$ , polymer selectivity.



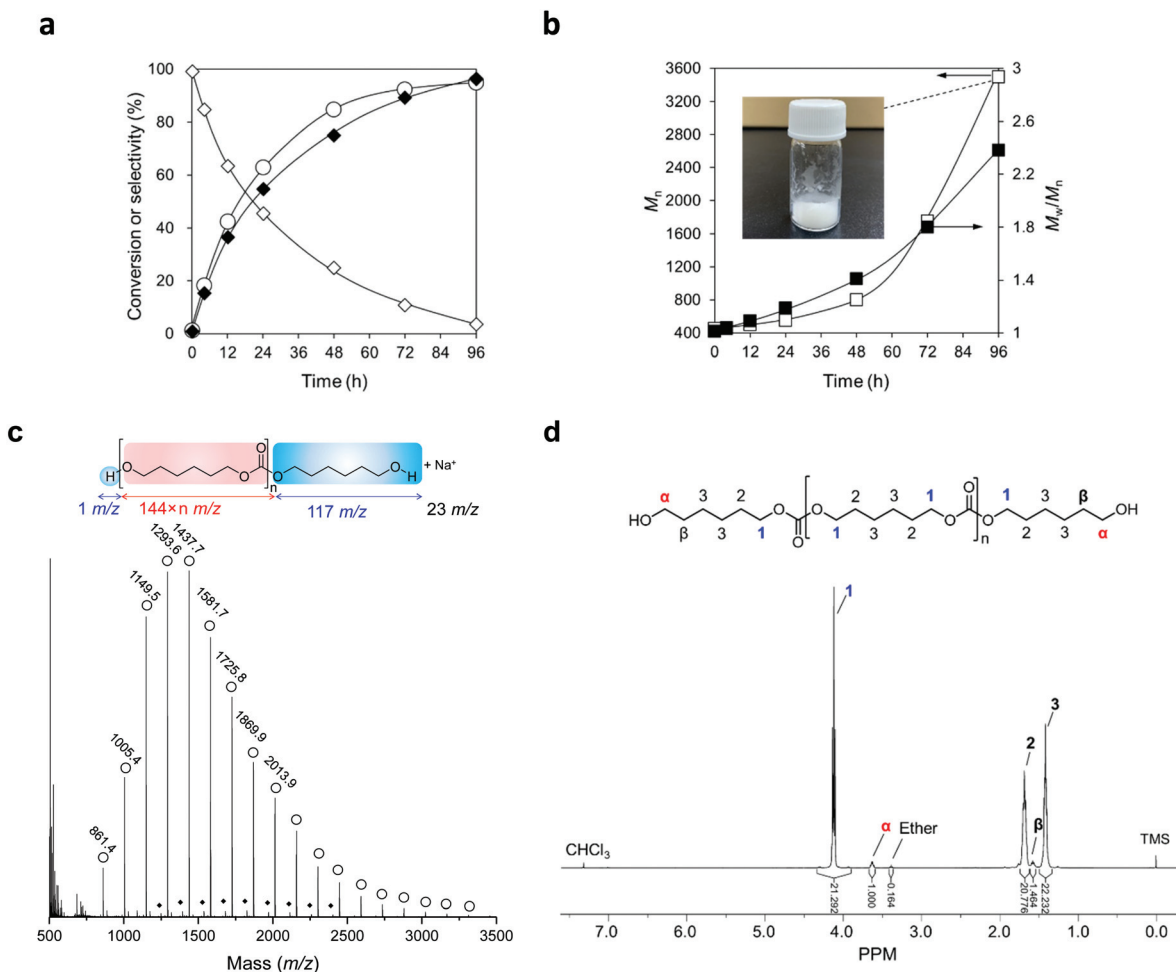


**Fig. 5** Effect of the 1,6-hexanediol concentration in the reaction of flow CO<sub>2</sub> and 1,6-hexanediol with a CeO<sub>2</sub> catalyst. Reaction conditions: CeO<sub>2</sub> 0.03 g, 1,6-hexanediol 2.0 g (17 mmol), solvent volume 1.5–18 mL (triglyme : diphenyl ether = 2 : 3 volume ratio), CO<sub>2</sub> flow rate 200 mL min<sup>-1</sup>, 483 K, 1 h. ○, Conversion; ◇, dimer selectivity; and ◆, polymer selectivity.

1,6-hexanediol was saturated over CeO<sub>2</sub>. The standard reaction conditions were set at a concentration of 2.4 M, which was in this range.

### Time-course of the reaction of 1,6-hexanediol and CO<sub>2</sub> over CeO<sub>2</sub> in the CO<sub>2</sub> flow semi-batch reactor and analyses of the produced polymer

Fig. 6a exhibits the time-course of the reaction of flow CO<sub>2</sub> and 1,6-hexanediol at 483 K with a CeO<sub>2</sub> catalyst and a mixture solvent of triglyme and diphenyl ether. The reaction proceeded smoothly to reach 95% conversion at 96 h. The selectivity to the dimer was high at a low conversion level and decreased with a longer reaction time, and conversely, the selectivity to the polymer kept increasing and reached 97% at 96 h. No non-polymeric by-product was observed during the reaction. The water content in the reaction media drastically decreased from 900 ppm to <4 ppm (below detection limit) during the heating-up to the reaction temperature of 483 K within several minutes and was unmeasurable at a longer reaction time. The conver-



**Fig. 6** Synthesis and characterization of polycarbonate diol from CO<sub>2</sub> and 1,6-hexanediol over CeO<sub>2</sub> in a CO<sub>2</sub>-flow reaction system: (a) Time-course and (b) molecular weight ( $M_n$ ) and dispersity ( $M_w/M_n$ ) profile. (c) MALDI-TOF/MS analysis. (d) <sup>1</sup>H-NMR analysis with CDCl<sub>3</sub> solvent. Marks in (a): ○, Conversion; ◇, dimer selectivity; and ◆, polymer selectivity; marks in (b) □,  $M_n$ ; ■,  $M_w/M_n$ . Reaction conditions of (a) and (b): CeO<sub>2</sub> 0.10 g, 1,6-hexanediol 2.0 g (17 mmol), triglyme 2 g, diphenyl ether 3 g, CO<sub>2</sub> flow rate 200 mL min<sup>-1</sup>, 483 K, 0–96 h.



sion of CO<sub>2</sub> was also calculated using the data of the 4 h reaction, in which the dimer and the trimer were the only products. 2000 mmol of CO<sub>2</sub> were introduced into the reactor in 4 hours and the formation amount of the carbonates was 2 mmol, meaning that the conversion of CO<sub>2</sub> was 0.1%.

The average molecular weight ( $M_n$ ) and dispersity ( $M_w/M_n$ ) of the produced products were analysed by size-exclusion chromatography (SEC) (Fig. 6b). Both the  $M_n$  and  $M_w/M_n$  of the products kept increasing during the reaction, and polymer with an  $M_n$  of 3500 (in the case of polycarbonate diols, 24 repeating units) was obtained at 96 h. The increase of  $M_n$  became faster when higher conversion was achieved with a longer reaction time, which is a characteristic of step-growth polymerization.

The polymer produced at 96 h was isolated by precipitation (the detailed method is described in the ESI†), and the isolated polymer was a pure white wax-like solid (Fig. 6b). The isolated polymer was analysed by MALDI-TOF mass (Fig. 6c) and <sup>1</sup>H-NMR (Fig. 6d) spectroscopy (the detailed method is described in the ESI†). A series of strong signals with a mass increase of 144 was observed in MALDI-TOF mass spectrum and they were assigned to poly(hexamethylene carbonate) diol (Fig. 6c). The other series of minor signals with a lower mass number of 44 than the strong signals was identified as poly(hexamethylene carbonate) diol with one ether linkage. The <sup>1</sup>H NMR chart of the obtained polymer (Fig. 6d) showed the characteristic signals at 3.6 ppm (marked as “α” in the chart) and 4.0–4.2 ppm (marked as “1”), which can be assigned to the protons of the methylene group adjacent to the OH group and carbonate group, respectively. The average molecular weight of the isolated polycarbonate diol is estimated to be 3200 g mol<sup>-1</sup> by calculating the ratio of the proton numbers on the two positions (“α” and “1”). The value was similar to that determined by SEC (3500 g mol<sup>-1</sup> based on polystyrene standards). A triplet signal at 3.4 ppm is assigned to the protons of the methylene group adjacent to the ether bond, which is in agreement with the result of MALDI-TOF mass spectra, and the ratio of the ether linkage to the carbonate linkage is 0.8%. There were no signals at 4.9 and 5.8 ppm, where the vinylic proton appears (an enlarged chart is shown in Fig. S9†).

The proposed reaction mechanism of the polycarbonate diols from CO<sub>2</sub> and 1,6-hexanediol over CeO<sub>2</sub> is shown in Fig. 7 based on the previous reports on the synthesis of dimethyl carbonate from CO<sub>2</sub> and methanol over CeO<sub>2</sub>, where the reaction mechanism was proposed by the kinetic studies and analyses such as DRIFTS and isotopic labelling studies.<sup>64,79,93</sup> The present reaction proceeded *via* the formation of dialkyl carbonate (dimer) from CO<sub>2</sub> and 1,6-hexanediol over CeO<sub>2</sub> (Fig. 6a), and hence the reaction mechanism of the present catalyst system would be similar to the previous one: (i) The dissociative adsorption of 1,6-hexanediol on the CeO<sub>2</sub> surface gives the alkoxide adspecies. (ii) The insertion of CO<sub>2</sub> into the alkoxide adspecies provides Ce-hydroxyhexyl carbonate adspecies. (iii) The nucleophilic attack of the oxygen anion in the alkoxide adspecies to the carbonate group in the Ce-hydroxyhexyl carbonate adspecies affords the corres-

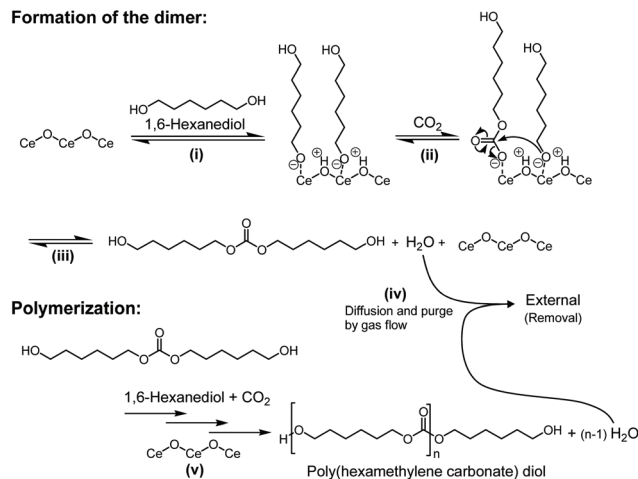


Fig. 7 Proposed reaction mechanism of the copolymerization of flow CO<sub>2</sub> and 1,6-hexanediol over a CeO<sub>2</sub> catalyst.

ponding linear carbonate (dimer). (iv) Diffusion and purge of the coproduced water from the reaction media to the gas phase by the gas flow. (v) Further reaction of the produced dimer with CO<sub>2</sub> and 1,6-hexanediol or the produced copolymer results in a step-growth polymerization with the production of poly(hexamethylene carbonate) diol. The water removal step in (iv) played a vital role in the reaction progress, which shifts the equilibrium and enables the dimer yield high enough to start the polymerization. Without this step, no products will be achieved under atmospheric pressure as shown in Table S3.† The high activity of CeO<sub>2</sub> for the reaction is due to the acid-base bifunctionality: CeO<sub>2</sub> has both weak acidic sites and medium basic sites, which can be used for the activation of CO<sub>2</sub> and alcohols.<sup>31,64,90</sup> Side reactions catalysed by strong acid catalysts, which afford by-products such as ethers and alkenes, are also suppressed because of the weak acidity of CeO<sub>2</sub>.

The high durability of CeO<sub>2</sub> was confirmed by the reusability test (Fig. 8). 0.8 gram of the CeO<sub>2</sub> catalyst was

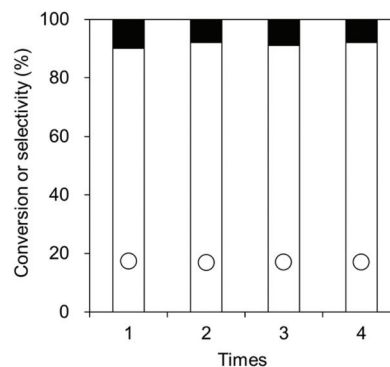
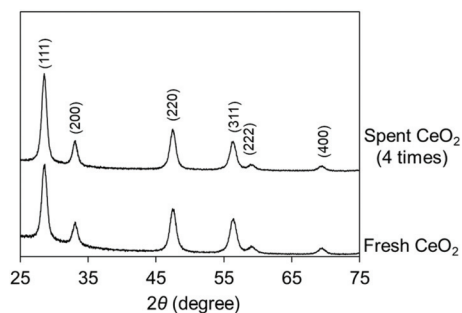


Fig. 8 Reusability test of the CeO<sub>2</sub> catalyst in the reaction of flow CO<sub>2</sub> and 1,6-hexanediol. ○: Conversion, white bar: dimer selectivity, and black bar: polymer selectivity. Reaction conditions: CeO<sub>2</sub> 0.08 g, 1,6-hexanediol 2.0 g (17 mmol), triglyme 2.0 g, diphenyl ether 3.0 g, CO<sub>2</sub> flow rate 200 mL min<sup>-1</sup>, 483 K, 4 h.





	BET surface area (m <sup>2</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )	Crystallite size (nm)
Spent CeO <sub>2</sub> (4 times)	82	9.2
Fresh CeO <sub>2</sub>	84	9.1

**Fig. 9** XRD patterns and BET surface area before and after the reuse test. The reaction results are shown in Fig. 8. The crystallite size of CeO<sub>2</sub> was estimated using the Scherrer equation [crystalline plane (111) was used for the estimation].

used, and a CeO<sub>2</sub> amount below 0.8 g would lead to a decrease in the conversion. The CeO<sub>2</sub> was used 4 times, providing similar conversions and selectivities. No distinct difference in the XRD patterns, crystallite size, and specific

surface area was observed between fresh CeO<sub>2</sub> catalyst and the spent CeO<sub>2</sub> catalyst which has been used 4 times (Fig. 9).

### Substrate scope of the CO<sub>2</sub> flow reaction system with a CeO<sub>2</sub> catalyst

The scope of the reaction system was investigated with various alcohols (Table 1). C<sub>4</sub>–C<sub>10</sub> α,ω-diols (entries 1–4) including *trans*-1,4-cyclohexanedimethanol, an α,ω-diol with a rigid structure, provided the target dimer and polycarbonate diols in high selectivity (>99%). Moreover, 1-decanol (entry 6), a primary alcohol, also reacted to give the corresponding linear carbonate in high selectivity. In the case of 1,2-propanediol (entry 5) which has primary and secondary OH groups, the propylene carbonate, a cyclic organic carbonate, was obtained without the production of linear carbonates.

## Conclusions

We demonstrated the direct transformation of atmospheric pressure flowing CO<sub>2</sub> with 1,6-hexanediol into the corresponding polycarbonate diol without any dehydration agents, achieving high yield and selectivity to the target polycarbonate

**Table 1** Scope of alcohols in the synthesis of organic carbonates using flow CO<sub>2</sub> and alcohols

Entry	Alcohol	B.P. <sup>a</sup> (K)	T (K)	Conv. (%)	Selectivity (%)		
1		523	483	85		25	Polymer <sup>b</sup> 75 Others <1
2		578	473	58		52	Polymer <sup>b</sup> 48 Others <1
3		508	453	30		73	Polymer <sup>b</sup> 27 Others <1
4		558	473	55		71	Polymer <sup>b</sup> 29 Others <1
5		458	393	13		>99	Polymer <sup>b</sup> <1 Others <1
6		503	483	53		>99	Others <1

Reaction conditions: CeO<sub>2</sub> 0.10 g, alcohol 17 mmol, triglyme 2 g, diphenyl ether 3 g, CO<sub>2</sub> flow rate 200 mL min<sup>-1</sup>, 393–483 K, 48 h. <sup>a</sup> Boiling point of the alcohols. <sup>b</sup> Polymers are defined as trimers and further polymerized into polycarbonate diols.



diol. CeO<sub>2</sub> worked as the most effective and reusable heterogeneous catalyst and the CO<sub>2</sub> flow system enabled the removal of water from the reaction media to overcome the reaction equilibrium. The wide applicability of the reaction system to other alcohols was confirmed and the corresponding organic (poly)carbonates were obtained in high selectivity (>99%). The developed catalyst system is expected to substitute for hazardous processes such as the phosgene process for the synthesis of polycarbonate diols and also contribute to the synthesis of other CO<sub>2</sub>-based organic carbonates with large molecular weights. Although the reaction conditions are comparatively severe at present, the catalyst system has high potential for the green process by the rationalization of the catalytic process.

## Experimental

### Materials

CeO<sub>2</sub> was prepared by calcining commercial CeO<sub>2</sub> (Daiichi Kigenso Kagaku Kogyo, purity of CeO<sub>2</sub> = 99.97%) in air at 873 K for 3 h, and the specific surface area (BET method) of the calcined CeO<sub>2</sub> is 84 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>. Other commercial metal oxides including ZrO<sub>2</sub> (Daiichi Kigenso Kagaku Kogyo), SiO<sub>2</sub> (Fuji Silysia Chemical), γ-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> (Sumitomo Chemical), MgO (Ube Industries), and TiO<sub>2</sub> (Nippon Aerosil) were also calcined under the same conditions before use. La<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, Dy<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, Gd<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, Eu<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, Sm<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, Y<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, Pr<sub>6</sub>O<sub>11</sub>, and ZnO purchased from Kanto Chemical, and SiO<sub>2</sub>-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> (product code: JRC-SAL-3) received from the Catalysis Society of Japan were used without any treatment. All the reagents and gases used in the experiments were used without further purification, which are as follows: 1,6-hexanediol [>97.0%, TCI (Tokyo Chemical Industry)], 1,10-decanediol (>97.0%, TCI), 1,4-butanediol (>98.0%, FUJIFILM Wako Pure Chemical), *trans*-1,4-cyclohexanedimethanol (>98.0%, TCI), 1,2-propanediol (>99.0%, TCI), 1-decanol (>98.0%, TCI), diphenyl ether (>99.0%, TCI), triethylene glycol dimethyl ether (>99.0%, stabilized with BHT, TCI), and diethylene glycol dimethyl ether (>99.0%, TCI), 1-methyl-2-pyrrolidone (>99.0%, TCI), tetraethylene glycol dimethyl ether (>98.0%, TCI), dipropylene glycol dimethyl ether (mixture of isomers) (>94.0%, TCI), diethylene glycol dibutyl ether (>98.0%, TCI), diphenylmethane (>99.0%, TCI), phenylcyclohexane (>97.0%, TCI), CO<sub>2</sub> (G1 grade, purity ≥ 99.995 vol%, H<sub>2</sub>O ≤ 2.6 ppm, Taiyo Nippon Sanso), and N<sub>2</sub> (G1 grade, purity ≥ 99.99995 vol%, H<sub>2</sub>O ≤ 0.5 ppm).

### Methods

**General procedure for the reaction of 1,6-hexanediol and CO<sub>2</sub> in a CO<sub>2</sub> flow semi-batch reactor.** The reaction was carried out in a set of glass apparatus including a 50 mL 3-neck pear-shaped flask at the bottom, a Graham's condenser (under ambient temperature) in the middle, and a glass trap filled with ethanol on the top (Fig. S2†). A catalyst and reagents were put into the flask, and then a PTFE tube for CO<sub>2</sub> introduction was inserted into the bottom of the flask. The glass apparatus

was finally set up, and the flask part was put into an oil bath for heating. When the reaction was done, the flask was transferred to an ice-water bath for cooling down. The ethanol in the glass trap was firstly collected with 1 g of diglyme (internal standard) added in for GC analysis. After the flask was cooled down to room temperature, 40 g of THF and 1 g of diglyme as an internal standard was injected in, and the mixture was collected for further analysis.

### Procedure of the reaction carried out in an autoclave reactor.

CeO<sub>2</sub>, 1,6-hexanediol, and a PTFE-coated magnetic spinner were put into a stainless-steel autoclave reactor with an inner volume of 190 mL. The autoclave was purged with 1 MPa CO<sub>2</sub> three times, and then pressurized to 5 MPa CO<sub>2</sub> [at room temperature, about 22 g (0.5 mol)]. The autoclave was then heated at 483 K (the heating-up took about 1 hour), and the pressure in the reactor increased to 7.5 MPa. The reaction was carried out for a designated reaction time, and then cooled in an ice water bath. The reaction mixture was collected in the same way noted in the general procedure.

## Author contributions

Yu Gu: Investigation, methodology, formal analysis, and writing – original draft. Masazumi Tamura: Conceptualization, funding acquisition, formal analysis, and writing – original draft. Yoshinao Nakagawa: Writing – review & editing. Kenji Nakao: Formal analysis. Kimihito Suzuki: Formal analysis. Keiichi Tomishige: Formal analysis, supervision, and writing – review & editing.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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