Efficient Inverted Tandem Polymer Solar Cells with a Solution-Processed Recombination Layer

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By developing new photoactive materials and advanced processing procedures the power conversion efficiency of polymer–fullerene bulk heterojunction solar cells has increased significantly and now approaches 10%.[1–3] The efficiency of polymer solar cells can be further improved by using a tandem configuration. Compared to single-junction cells, tandem cells reduce thermalization losses by absorbing high-energy photons in a wide band gap cell, and reduce transmission losses by absorbing low-energy photons in a small band gap cell. The choice of materials used in the two photoactive layers and in the recombination layer that serves to electrically connect the two subcells are crucial for the performance of a tandem cell. The photovoltaic layers must provide high conversion efficiencies, whereas the recombination interlayer should provide a contact with minimal resistive, optical, and energetic losses.

The development of polymer tandem cells is receiving increasing attention.[4–9] Most tandem cells reported so far, have the traditional polarity configuration, that is, with a transparent hole-collecting contact and an opaque metallic electron-collecting contact. However, inverted configurations with a metallic hole collecting contact and transparent electron-collecting contact[10,11] may have an advantage with respect to printability and stability due to the relative environmental stability of the electron transport layer and hole-collecting contact.[12,13]

The first inverted tandem solar cells were reported by Sun and co-workers[14,15] who used poly(3-hexylthiophene)-[6,6]-phenyl-C61-butyric acid methyl ester (P3HT:PCBM) bulk heterojunction solar cells in both layers of the tandem. The intermediate recombination contact used was a complex stack of thermally evaporated MoO3 and ultrathin multiple metal layers of Ag, Al, and Ca. This recombination contact provided an exact summation of the open-circuit voltage ($V_{oc}$) of the subcells and a power conversion efficiency of $\eta = 2.8\%$. Improved efficiencies for inverted tandem polymer solar cells were reported by Yang and co-workers.[16] By using a wide-band P3HT:PCBM front cell and a small band gap poly(4,4-dioctyldithiopheno-(2,2'-b',2'-3',3''-d)siologe)-2,6-diyal-alt-(2,1,3-benzothiadiazole)-4,7-diyal-[6,6]phenyl-C61-butyric acid methyl ester (PSBTBT:[70]PCBM back) cell an efficiency of $\eta = 5.1\%$ was obtained.[16] For the recombination contact, MoO3 and Al were thermally evaporated, followed by depositing ZnO using a precursor solution. Jen and co-workers[17] reported the first solution-processed inverted tandem polymer solar cell using a PEDOT:PSS/ZnO recombination contact between two P3HT:[60]PCBM photoactive layers. They demonstrated that cells can be improved using a fullerene self-assembled (C60-SAM) to modify the interface between the ZnO and the P3HT:[60]PCBM layer. The highest tandem cell reported had $\eta = 2.9\%$, but actually performed less than the best single-junction cell ($\eta = 4.1\%$) presented in the same study.[17] More recently, Krebs and co-workers reported another fully solution-processed inverted tandem solar cell with a P3HT:[60]PCBM front cell and a back cell consisting of poly(dithienothiophene-co-dialkoxybenzothiadiazole) (PDTDABT) with [60]PCBM.[18] The recombination layer consisted of V$_2$O$_5$/Ag nanoparticles/ZnO. The inverted tandem showed an efficiency of $\eta = 1.0\%$ and a loss in $V_{oc}$ compared to summed $V_{oc}$ of the single-junction solar cells.

In all inverted polymer tandem solar cells reported to date the $V_{oc}$ of the two subcells are virtually identical. Hence, neither of these inverted tandem cells really exploits the fundamental advantage of a tandem configuration, where high-energy photons should be converted in a wide band gap subcell with a higher $V_{oc}$ and the low-energy photons in a small band gap cell with lower $V_{oc}$. Only in this way, thermalization and transmission losses can both be reduced simultaneously. Further, to enable future roll-to-roll processing of efficient inverted tandem cells, there is an obvious need for robust solution-processed recombination layers.

Here we demonstrate an efficient inverted tandem polymer solar cell configuration (Figure 1a) that overcomes both problems. We develop a fully solution-processed PEDOT:PSS/ZnO recombination layer that connects the two subcells with minimal losses. The inverted tandem cell uses a wide band gap bulk heterojunction front cell consisting of P3HT as donor and indene-C60-bisadduct (ICBA)[19] as acceptor (Figure 1b). P3HT:ICBA cells give efficient solar cells with $V_{oc} = 0.84$ V in a conventional configuration.[20] The small band gap back cell of our tandem consists of a diketopyrrolopyrrole–quinquethiophene copolymer (PDPST; Figure 1b) as donor with [60]PCBM as acceptor, which provides $V_{oc} = 0.58$ V in a standard device layout.[21] With bandgaps of 1.87 and 1.46 eV, the optical absorption of the two active layers are complementary and cover a large part of the solar emission (Figure 1c). We show that the individual single-junction cells provide power conversion efficiencies of $\eta = 4.4\%$ and $\eta = 5.0\%$ in an inverted configuration and reach $\eta = 5.8\%$ when combined in an inverted tandem cell.

To create an inverted device polarity, it is necessary to modify the work function of the optically transparent bottom...
Results in incomplete or poor film formation. This problem and hydrophobic active layers, such as P3HT:ICBA, dewet a polymer–fullerene layer by spin coating. Especially, for apolar P3HT:ICBA surface with a N2 plasma and using a PEDOT:PSS was effectively solved by using a combination of pretreating the P3HT:ICBA inverted cells with an active layer thickness.

Compared to normal configuration tandem cells, the challenge can directly be deposited from solution onto this ZnO layer. However, PEDOT:PSS is generally processed as a dispersion in water and it is notoriously difficult to form a robust procedure for depositing a hole collecting layer on top of the first active layer. In principle, PEDOT:PSS is well suited for this purpose. However, PEDOT:PSS is generally processed as a dispersion in water and it is notoriously difficult to form a closed, thin (<50 nm), and smooth PEDOT:PSS layers on top of a polymer–fullerene layer by spin coating. Especially, for apolar and hydrophobic active layers, such as P3HT:ICBA, dewetting results in incomplete or poor film formation. This problem was effectively solved by using a combination of pretreating the P3HT:ICBA surface with a N2 plasma and using a PEDOT:PSS formulation designed for coating on plastic substrates. Specifically, we applied a mild N2 plasma (0.6 mbar, 10 W, 2 s) to make the P3HT:ICBA surface more hydrophilic and then spin-coated PEDOT:PSS (Clevios F CPP105D diluted with isopropanol) to create a continuous 40 nm thin PEDOT:PSS film. The use of N2 as compared to air as plasma medium reduces the oxidation and deterioration of the photoactive P3HT:ICBA layer by the plasma. Using this procedure inverted single-junction ITO/ZnO/P3HT:ICBA/PEDOT:PSS/Ag devices were made reproducibly. Figure 2 shows the current density–voltage (J–V) characteristics and external quantum efficiency (EQE) of the optimized P3HT:ICBA inverted cells with an active layer thickness of 225 nm. The short-circuit current density, determined from integrating the EQE with the solar spectrum (Jsc = 8.27 mA cm−2), open-circuit voltage (Voc = 0.82 V), and fill factor (FF = 0.65) result in a power conversion efficiency of η = 4.4% (Table 1) for this cell. The EQE reaches a maximum value of 67% at 530 nm.

For the back cells, the processing is easier. The PDPPST:[60]PCBM layer is more polar and the deposition of PEDOT:PSS from water/isopropanol does not require a plasma pretreatment. Besides a PEDOT:PSS/Ag top contact, we also tested MoO3/Ag as hole collecting electrode, obtaining identical results. The J–V characteristics and EQE of the optimized inverted ITO/ZnO/PDPPST:[60]PCBM/MoO3/Ag single-junction cell with a 100 nm active layer are shown in Figure 2. The optimized cell gives Jsc = 12.75 mA cm−2, Voc = 0.59 V, and FF = 0.67, resulting in a power conversion efficiency of η = 5.0% (Table 1).

Having established reproducible procedures for making efficient inverted single-junction wide and small band gap cells, the construction of the tandem cell can be considered. In the tandem cell, we use a ZnO nanoparticle layer deposited from isopropanol on top of a PEDOT:PSS layer to create the intermediate recombination contact. UV–vis measurements verified that isopropanol does not wash away the previously deposited PEDOT:PSS layer. Acidic PEDOT:PSS solutions are known to readily dissolve ZnO, but once the PEDOT:PSS layer has been thermally annealed the acidity does not cause a problem when ZnO nanoparticles are deposited on top. To test the performance of intermediate contact, ITO/PEDOT:PSS/ZnO/Ag devices were made. The J–V characteristics (Figure 3) show that an ohmic PEDOT:PSS/ZnO contact is formed under UV illumination. The resistance measured is primarily determined by the series resistance of the ITO. UV illumination creates free electrons in the ZnO nanoparticles that help to establish a good contact with PEDOT:PSS.22 The effect of UV illumination saturates after 4 min (Figure 3), but we found that this time varies with different batches of ZnO nanoparticles prepared.

In tandem polymer solar cells with series connection, the layer thicknesses of the front and back cells have to be balanced to adjust the current extracted from each layer. We have previously shown that in polymer solar cells equalizing the current generation of the subcells is not a sufficient design criterion due to the significant dependence of the photocurrent on the applied voltage.24 To establish the optimal thickness of the photoactive layers in an inverted ITO/ZnO/P3HT:ICBA/PEDOT:PSS/Ag and ITO/ZnO/PDPPST:[60]PCBM/MoO3/Ag tandem configuration, we prepared the corresponding single-junction devices with a range of active layer thicknesses. For each layer thickness, we characterized the cells and also calculated the absorbed photon flux using a simulation of the optical absorption and reflection of the entire layer stack of the device using the wavelength.
spectrally averaged internal quantum efficiency (IQE) was then determined as the ratio between the short-circuit current (obtained by integrating the product of the solar spectrum with the experimental EQE of the solar cell) and the absorbed flux of photons from the standard global air mass 1.5 sunlight (AM1.5G). Figure 2c shows that the spectrally averaged IQEs decrease with thickness but remain above 70% for both active layers. Combining the thickness dependent IQE and $J-V$ data with an optical simulation of the tandem cell configuration, we found that maximum performance for a ITO/ZnO/P3HT:ICBA/PEDOT:PSS/ZnO/PDPP5T:[60]PCBM/MoO$_3$/Ag tandem cell configuration is expected for layer thicknesses combinations ranging from 185 to 235 nm for the P3HT:ICBA front cell combined with 70 – 105 nm for the PDPP5T:[60]PCBM back cell.

Figure 4a shows the $J-V$ characteristics of a tandem cell with a 220 nm front cell and a 90 nm back cell after brief UV illumination to create the intermediate contact. The inverted tandem cell is characterized by $J_{sc} = 7.23$ mA cm$^{-2}$, $V_{oc} = 1.35$ V, and FF = 0.60 resulting in a power conversion efficiency of $\eta = 5.8\%$ (Table 1). Over 20 nominally identical devices the tandem cell efficiency was 5.5 ± 0.4%. The EQE of the inverted tandem cell (Figure 4b), measured under appropriate bias illumination and electrical bias conditions,[25] shows that the subcells largely convert complementary parts of the solar spectrum with peak dependent refractive index ($n$) and extinction coefficient ($k$) of the photoactive, charge transport, and electrode layers. The

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active layer</th>
<th>$J_{sc}$</th>
<th>$J_{sc}$ (EQE)</th>
<th>$V_{oc}$</th>
<th>FF</th>
<th>$\eta$</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>P3HT:ICBA (225 nm)</td>
<td>7.48</td>
<td>8.27</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>4.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>PDPP5T:[60]PCBM (100 nm)</td>
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<td>12.75</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tandem measured</td>
<td>7.23</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Characteristics of the optimized single-junction and tandem solar cells.

$^a$Determined from white light $J-V$; $^b$ Determined from integrating the EQE with the AM1.5 G spectrum.
found to be 6.82 mA cm$^{-2}$ for P3HT:ICBA and 7.45 mA cm$^{-2}$ for PDPP5T:[60]PCBM. With these values it is possible to construct the $J$–$V$ characteristics of the tandem cell from the corresponding single-junction cells that were made on the same day as the tandem cells that have the same layer thickness as the subcells. The $J$–$V$ characteristics of the two single junctions (Figure 4c) were recorded under reduced illumination conditions, such that their short-circuit currents match with the values obtained from the EQEs of the subcells in the tandem. Assuming a loss-free recombination layer, the $J$–$V$ characteristic of the tandem can then be constructed (Figure 4c) by adding the two curves using Kirchhoff’s law [26] and compared to the measured characteristics (Figure 4a and Table 2). This comparison reveals that the PEDOT:PSS/ZnO recombination contact causes no loss in open-circuit voltage but that the fill factor in the tandem is reduced from the expected value of 0.64 to 0.60. This is a small but significant loss that is at least partly caused by resistive losses as evidenced by the observation that the current density under forward bias in the constructed $J$–$V$ curve (which assumes zero resistance in the intermediate layer) exceeds the experimental values.

In conclusion, we have shown that a solution-processed recombination layer consisting of 40 nm of PEDOT:PSS and 30 nm of ZnO nanoparticles can be used to make efficient tandem solar cells with inverted polarity. By using a mild N$_2$ plasma treatment and depositing PEDOT:PSS from water/isopropanol, followed by spin-coating ZnO nanoparticles, we were able to reproducibly create a recombination contact onto hydrophobic P3HT:ICBA layers. The inverted tandem cell that comprises P3HT:ICBA as wide band gap front cell with high $V_{oc}$ and PDPP5T:[60]PCBM as small band gap back cell with lower $V_{oc}$ as a result, the tandem cell has a power conversion efficiency of $\eta = 5.8\%$, which is higher than that of the optimized single-junction cells and which is among the highest ones reported for this type of solar cells to date. Further advances in efficiency can be expected when polymer materials for more efficient single-junction layers become available and when the resistive losses in the recombination contact can be further reduced.

**Experimental Section**

Devices were fabricated by spin-casting ZnO nanoparticles from acetonite onto precleaned indium tin oxide (ITO) substrates (Naranjo substrates), followed by annealing in a nitrogen-filled glove box at...
150 °C for 15 min. For PDPPST single junctions, a 1:2 weight ratio of 6 mg mL\(^{-1}\) PDPPST and [60]PCBM (Solenne BV) was dissolved in a 5% v/v solution of o-dichlorobenzene (ODCB) in chloroform and spin casted. The devices were completed by evaporation of 10 nm MoO\(_3\) and 100 nm Ag. For P3HT:ICBA single junctions and tandem, Plexirene PV2000 was spin casted on top of the ZnO-covered ITO substrates and annealed for 30 min at 170 °C in a nitrogen-filled glove box. A N\(_2\) plasma of 10 W was used for 2 s using Ag electrodes (0.0676 cm\(^2\) for the 0.09 cm\(^2\) cell and 0.1296 cm\(^2\) for the 0.16 cm\(^2\) cell), to avoid extra current generation due to the high lateral dimensions to the device area determined by the overlap of the ITO and PEDOT:PSS, which was spin casted and annealed for 10 min at 120 °C. For single junctions, the device was completed by evaporation of 100 nm Ag. For tandem cells, a layer of ZnO nanoparticles was deposited from isopropanol and then annealed at 136 °C for 15 s to avoid complete the tandem cell, PDPPST[60]PCBM from chloroform/ODCB was spin coated on top of the annealed ZnO layer, followed by deposition of MoO\(_3\) and Ag in high vacuum by thermal evaporation. Tandem cells were illuminated for several minutes with UV light with a Spectroline EN-160 L/F 365 nm hand lamp from Spectronics Corporation.

EQE measurements were performed in a homebuilt setup. Mechanically modulated (Stanford Research SR 540 chopper) monochromatic (Oriel, Cornerstone 130) light from a 50 W tungsten-halogen lamp (Osram 64610) was used as probe light, in combination with a Schott GG385 UV filter and a Hoya LB120 daylight filter. EQE measurements were performed in a homebuilt setup. The research was supported by Agentschap NL in the POLYMOL project APOLLO (ERAPV01005). This work forms part of the Joint Solar Chemistry Mat.-Technol. Research Program (JSP) and of the Stichting voor Fundamenteel Onderzoek der Materie (FOM), which is supported financially by NWO. This work is cofinanced by Nuon Heliantos.

Received: December 21, 2011
Published online: