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STRUCTURAL EFFECTS OF THERMAL PROCESSING ON RED SEAWEEDS FOR THE PRODUCTION OF BIO-BASED FOOD PACKAGING MATERIALS

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This study evaluates the use of whole seaweed biomass to obtain bio-based films for food packaging applications in a more sustainable and energy efficient way. To this end, four different species of agarophytes (*Gelidium sesquipedale*, *Gracilaria chilensis*, *Gracilaria tenuistipitata* and *Gracilaria verrucosa*) were minimally processed by melt blending combined with compression moulding, investigating the effect of the composition and cell wall structure of the different species on the final performance of the films. The seaweed biomass was mainly composed of carbohydrates (35-50%), but significant amounts of proteins, ashes and lipids were also detected. Temperature-resolved SAXS experiments evidenced the distinct behaviour of the different seaweeds upon thermal processing, with those species with higher cellulose content (*G. sesquipedale* and *G. verrucosa*) presenting a greater interfibrillar packing density and thermal resistance. The higher cellulose content of *G. sesquipedale* resulted in stronger films with high water vapour barrier capacity, while the higher agar content of *G. chilensis* improved its elongation capacity. The results from this work evidence the potential of red seaweed biomass to generate food packaging materials in a cost-effective and environmentally friendly way and show the great utility of SAXS to investigate the effect of cell wall nanostructure on the processability and properties of the obtained materials.

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